

PRIDE OF WAR



GUSTAF JANSON

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PRIDE OF WAR

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BY
GUSTAF JANSON

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PRIDE OF WAR

I

THE ANARCHIST

23430

'ANARCHIST!' replied Alfonso Zirilli to the question of the non-commissioned officer.

2-4-1913
All the men in the ranks stretched their necks and stared at their bold comrade. Those who knew Alfonso already, smiled approvingly; the rest shook their heads or opened their mouths in astonishment. All of them silently wondered what punishment would be meted out to the conscript. The expression on the face of the sergeant scarcely changed. He had heard the same answer often before, although never, perhaps, given with such open malignity. His glance lingered a moment longer than necessary on Alfonso Zirilli. If there were anything to be read there, it was a mingling of contempt and pity.

Alfonso stood before him stooping, his whole bearing as unsoldierly as possible. He felt a little afraid of this cold tranquillity; but rage and anger still held in him the upper hand.

'I did not ask for your opinions,' said the sergeant

with ironical distinctness, 'but for your occupation.' And then he added sharply, 'What are you?'

'From to-day apprentice to Murder,' came Alfonso's answer quickly, in a tone of obstinate defiance. He hated war and the soldier's vocation, and by Heaven, he would make no secret of his feelings. But now that the longed-for opportunity had arrived openly to express his abhorrence, he felt no joy. In place of any satisfaction in the execution of this deed of heroism round which his thoughts for weeks had revolved, he felt only a cowardly dread. His knees shook with fear of the awful consequences of his temerity.

The sergeant merely nodded. But he invested this simple movement with such a threatening air that Alfonso's blood ran cold. The non-commissioned officer then turned to the next conscript and renewed his questions. But so long as the inspection lasted he threw occasional glances at Alfonso. His mien and bearing expressed more clearly than words: 'We have means for making people of this sort more tractable! Just wait, my lad! . . .' One by one he went down the line of the recruits; asked questions and compared the answers with the list he held in his hand. They were poor stuff to make soldiers of, as they always were in this district. Untameable, violent, and cunning when they first served with the colours: suitable treatment and a firm hand had usually changed them into tolerable soldiers. The officers and non-commissioned officers of this company were chosen with particular care; they had handled this same raw material for ten years and knew what was to be made of it. Again the sergeant looked at Alfonso, and, although he stood more than ten paces away, his

glance told like a lash, and wakened a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety in more than one of those who saw it.

Alfonso Zirilli stood at the extremity of the right wing, surly and morose, his head sunk between his shoulders. He had been stupid to answer so unreservedly : he saw it now. But had they not all of them sworn to answer in a loud, distinct voice, 'Anarchist' ? When they left the town they swore a solemn oath to stand by each other. No cowardly evasions, no false compromise, only the pure strong truth. How their eyes had shone, how their cheeks had glowed, as through their clenched teeth they made their vows ! 'Anarchist' shall ring from mouth to mouth. 'Anarchist' and nothing further. Thus they would declare war on war. And there stood that fat dumpling, Ambrogio Lorte, and said, quite peaceably, 'Printer' ! Giovanni Feretto almost whispered his 'Factory-hand' ! His fellows in the printing-works shall learn what a miserable worm their Ambrogio is. In the factory they would know how to treat Giovanni. . . . The sergeant's eye glanced quietly and meditatively over Alfonso, and the latter thought bitterly what a fool he had been to volunteer to be the first. The others had all followed the example of Ambrogio and Giovanni. Their opinions were not worth a *centesimo*, and whoever paid as much for their strength of character made a bad bargain.

'Wretched creatures !—cowards !' thought Alfonso, disgusted.

Well, he would find a spare moment in which to talk to these weaklings face to face. He would give it to them. . . .

The sergeant turned his eyes again in his direction, and Alfonso's head drooped thoughtfully. What did the fellow mean by continually looking at him? Had he become angry, had he scolded, or, as Alfonso hoped, let himself into an argument with him, it would have been an easy matter to demonstrate how misguided were the other's preconceived notions and ideas. But he was silent, shrugged his shoulders, and passed on. Alfonso's thoughts took a new turn. Perhaps it would not be so easy, after all, to make a propaganda of his ideas. And now he had drawn attention to himself, had stuck his head in a noose, and awakened the suspicion of the enemy. Alfonso Zirilli bit his lips in perplexity. Had he, the cunning one, behaved like a fool?

The voice of the sergeant rang out, short, sharp, and penetrating, over the parade-ground. The men in the squad obeyed involuntarily and held themselves straighter.

'Right turn!'

Alfonso stubbornly made a left turn. He would show the cowards that he had not yet given up the game.

The sergeant controlled his vexation; went quietly up to Alfonso, took him by the arm and led him along the lines. His comrades stole a glance at him as he passed. Most of their eyes expressed sympathy, but at the back of some of them fear could be read.

'You are stupid!' said the sergeant, loud enough for all to hear; 'you shall go behind.' He flung him, without consideration, to the rear, and left him to his fate. To a corporal, who had kept pace with him on the other side of the ranks and who now advanced, he said:

‘Keep an eye on this fellow! he is good for nothing!’

Alfonso ground his teeth. He was humiliated before his comrades; snatched from the position that was his by right. He, Alfonso the clever, was overthrown and brought to shame. The colour came and went in his cheeks; the sweat stood in drops on his forehead. Alfonso began to perceive how difficult it was to resist the force in whose power he was.

‘By the right!—quick march!’ commanded the sergeant.

The forty men set themselves simultaneously in motion. Giovanni Feretto, who led, now that Alfonso had lost his place, held himself erect and marched like a soldier.

Alfonso desired more than ever to expose their perfidy. He bit his teeth together so sharply that it hurt, and as the others began with the left foot he put out his right. Alfonso Zirilli is not so easily overcome!

But in an instant the corporal was at his side. A gentle kick reminded Alfonso of his mistake. He stared at the corporal. If they called him stupid, why should he not take the advantage this gave him?

The corporal shook his head. His faithful dog-like eyes looked at Alfonso with genuine sympathy.

‘The other foot!’ he whispered.

Alfonso pretended to be deaf.

‘The other foot!’ again—this time somewhat impatiently. And, as Alfonso would not yet understand, he added: ‘It is not good to be *too* stupid!’

A secret threat sounded in these words, so that Alfonso deemed it wiser at last to obey.

The troop marched into the barrack-yard and drew

up at one side. Several such groups were already standing there, each led by a non-commissioned officer. Upon and at the foot of the steps which led to the main building were gathered the officers. At the top stood the colonel; next him, the commanders of battalions and companies; while the officers of lower ranks formed a wide circle around these. They laughed and chatted, without taking any notice of the conscripts.

Alfonso looked at them from where he stood. These, then, were the gentlemen who held his fate in their hands. They governed his actions, his time, his speech. . . .

‘Yes!’ growled Alfonso, lowering his head defiantly, ‘we will see who gets the best of it.’

The officers separated themselves into groups and distributed themselves over the courtyard. A tall captain and two lieutenants approached the troop in which Alfonso had the last place.

‘Our commander!’ thought Alfonso, and stole a glance at him. Beneath the plumed hat he saw a hard, rigid face that might have been carved in wood, a very short, blunt nose, and a heavy pitch-black moustache whose ends were elegantly curled. The ears stood out like bats’ wings from a head which in proportion to the body was ridiculously small. But the eyes interested Alfonso most of all. He observed as the captain came nearer that they were large, almost perfectly circular and without a trace of expression. They reminded one of clean-washed china, so bright and shiny were they. This, then, was the man to whom his military education was entrusted. Alfonso wished for some surer token than the cold, indifferent glance of these dead eyes.

‘Anything special to report?’ asked the captain in a soft voice as he came up to the sergeant. With his right hand fixed to the rim of his cap, the subordinate made his report. He spoke so softly that Alfonso could not understand a word. But the captain, whose gaze wandered indifferently along the lines, suddenly fixed his attention on the end of the outside wing, and Alfonso knew that now he was being spoken of. Involuntarily he pulled himself up like the others and, imitating the upright carriage of the sergeant, stood to attention.

The captain nodded, raised his hand to his hat, and commanded a turn. Alfonso responded smartly to the command, and at the word ‘march’ he began with the left foot first.

The corporal, who had paid particular attention to him, smiled approvingly.

After a little while they were drawn up in two lines. Alfonso stood behind a farmer, whose clothes still diffused the pungent odour of the homely cow-stall. On his left he had a little undersized man he had never seen before; on his right stood the comrades in whose company he had that day arrived. As he stood squeezed in between these people, all taking pains to listen and understand properly, Alfonso noticed that he lost a part of his will-power. His stubbornness became uncertainty. He squinted first to one side and then to the other, to read the faces of his companions. He on the left was stupidly attentive; he on the right, likewise. A new thought came into his head: Would it not be better to climb down now right at the beginning? The next instant he clenched his teeth again. Little did they know Alfonso Zirilli. Did not the anarchist prefer imprisonment to submission?

To be sure, he would rather avoid them both. He had already perceived that here a little foresight was necessary. Apparent obedience and secret revolt was his programme for the present.

When the articles of clothing belonging to the uniform were distributed, Alfonso happened to be on the spot and was lucky enough to obtain clothes that were new and clean. As soon as he had changed, he examined his appearance with pleasure. His tunic sat on him as if it had been poured on his body, and his trousers fell in innumerable folds over his gaiters.

'Corpo di Bacco!' he grunted, well pleased. He was a well-built fellow and the uniform became him. Alfonso already began to think of the impression it would make on a visit home; he knew how the girls appreciated the glitter and colour of a uniform. Involuntarily he gave his hat a slight push so that it sat a little on one side, and then a further adjustment brought it well over one ear. Alfonso smiled, and imagined already a meeting with the graceful Anarella. If he were to approach her now, surely she would no longer threaten him with her nails!

That night Alfonso Zirilli slept with a feeling of insecurity—till then unknown to him; as if a sort of change was going on in him. . . .

Waking next morning, strengthened in mind and body, it was clear to him that he must be reasonable. Any attempt to obtain converts to his ideas was here out of place, and his hatred for the rottenness of Society would be best kept to himself. It would pay to keep his mouth shut, to sham submission, and make the best of what could not be avoided. A year is soon over; and, while it lasted, he was a soldier; afterwards, an

anarchist once more. Alfonso was pleased with himself.

But the mistake he had already made brought its own punishment. The commander of his company, Captain Manlio Vitale, was a soldier to his finger-tips. He embraced his vocation with a truly religious enthusiasm ; he loved his soldiers as if they were his own children, and fostered the firm resolve to bring them up as veritable warriors. When Alfonso Zirilli's answer was reported to him, he smacked his lips and smiled.

' Ha ! . . . Anarchist . . . indeed ? Excellent, Sergeant Lucinello !—excellent ! ' In the china-bright eyes there was no expression ; but the mighty moustache bristled like the whiskers of a lion who scents his prey in the distance. ' I will talk to Lieutenant Bianchelli about it. You, for your part, give Corporal Lantori a hint. He must not let the fellow out of his sight. Ha ! Anarchist ! . . . Excellent ! I say. Excellent ! . . . '

The stout little sergeant gazed in admiration at his gigantic superior. He knew what it meant when the captain's moustache bristled. Alfonso, too, found out soon enough.

Although he did his drills in every way as well as the others, Corporal Lantori was always at hand to find some fault in him. He was ordered out of the ranks to march up and down the sunny barrack-yard ; was tormented with fatigue duties and punishment drills. Alfonso was strong enough to stand it. But, as he was the only one in the company who was baited in this way, he began to lose patience. Did they refuse to see the proffered hand ? Were they playing with his good intentions ? However firmly he had

resolved to suppress his animosity, it surged up again ; and, when the corporal one day called him a donkey, he could no longer contain himself. He answered back, and was told to hold his tongue. The next instant the quarrel was at its height. Half an hour later Alfonso was given the opportunity to set in order his meditations on the subject of his experiences.

With his head on his hand he sat in the dark on a wooden form and pondered until his head ached. The deliberate manner in which his wordy defence was cut short right at the beginning pointed his way unmistakably. Alfonso bit his lips till they bled. But his pliant southern nature soon overcame both rage and spite. He saw his powerlessness, and shrugged his shoulders. He must endure and wait, and keep his mouth shut.

Alfonso became docile. He even tried what lip-service and flattery could achieve. This made an impression on Lieutenant Bianchelli. He often had a friendly smile or an approving nod for the most impossible soldier. His comrades, on the other hand, treated him with a superiority that wounded him.

‘ Alfonso is really a fool ! ’ was the opinion of the somewhat limited Giovanni, who for years had looked up to the person named with admiration. He shrugged his shoulders and whistled contemptuously.

Ambrogio shook his head and declared that he had long since noticed it. And Sergeant Lucinello and Corporal Lantori had often asserted the same thing. They were men of experience who could judge a man’s worth.

Alfonso restrained his impetuosity. He sweated in the barrack-yard, and performed all the exercises

smarter than anyone else. Behind his back, the lieutenant in charge of the section smiled doubtfully—this Zirilli was as pliant as wax; Sergeant Lucinello had exaggerated. The lieutenant straightened himself and went up to Captain Vitale.

The tall captain stood right in the heat of the sun and watched the different squads around him. Nothing escaped his piercing eye. The harsh clamour of the words of command was a joy to him; with pleasure his little round nostrils breathed in this atmosphere laden with dust and sweat. When the lieutenant imparted to him his opinion of Zirilli, the captain laughed noisily.

‘Anarchist!—listen! I know the tribe; I’ve studied them. Nowadays, unfortunately, only too frequent. But I will knock the nonsense out of them. Perhaps you think I did not know that there are several of the same sort in the company? Yes, my dear Bianchelli, several . . . seven or eight. But I will hammer them flat; I will squeeze their brains dry. And when that is attained, I will cram them with military ideas.’ His bearing became even stiffer; his chest expanded, and he breathed deep. ‘I will transform them into good soldiers’—he struck the open palm of his left hand with his clenched right—‘do you hear?—good soldiers!’

The lieutenant looked up at his superior. He could not stand up to these shining but expressionless eyes; involuntarily he felt himself impressed by the weight and power of this gigantic figure. If anyone was in a position to transform men, this was the man to do it.

‘You are not military enough, Bianchelli,’ the

captain continued, wrinkling his brows. ' You imagine—I don't know what ! Yes, my dear Bianchelli, you think too much ! It is a bad habit ; get rid of it, or you'll never be a good officer. You busy yourself with—yes, what do you busy yourself with ? No need to answer, none required. But think of your promotion ! of the reputation of the regiment ! of your colours ! Everything else is no concern of a genuine officer. And cultivate a little reserve—a little reserve, I say ! Apply yourself to everything that strengthens the military spirit . . . yes, that's it . . . the military spirit. That is all-important ! ' From an immeasurable height Captain Vitale looked down on the lieutenant, whom he suspected of wasting his time with book-reading. And probably books, too, of whose contents the captain would not approve.

Lieutenant Bianchelli was silent. It was useless to discuss such questions with the giant. One that boasted he never opened a book or looked at a newspaper. . . . ' I am a soldier and nothing else ! ' was a standing phrase of Captain Vitale's. ' Ask me anything about the Service and I will give you an answer. The rest doesn't concern me.' The lieutenant did not quite succeed in suppressing a slight sigh as he thought who the man was.

' As for this Zirilli, I have not picked him out, he has offered himself,' continued Captain Vitale ; ' when the others see how he is treated, they will soon lie down. So much sense they have got, although it is a pretty set of cattle this time for us to make men of. But Zirilli, I will work into—into dough, into fine white dough.' The captain bent down to the lieutenant, blew his garlic-scented breath in his face, and

added proudly : ' And when that is done, I will bake an excellent soldier out of this lump of dough. Eh ! Bianchelli, do you hear—an excellent soldier ! ' Captain Vitale drew himself up to his full majestic height, and looked down triumphantly on the little and, in his opinion, sadly unmilitary lieutenant.

From his place in the rank and file Alfonso had stolen an occasional look at the two officers. He surmised intuitively that they were talking of him. As he saw the lieutenant move away from the tall captain he sighed involuntarily. Captain Vitale was big and strong, and knew what he was about ; the lieutenant was helpless, weak, and irresolute.

Alfonso forgot for an instant to pay strict attention. Corporal Lantori was at his side in a flash, calling Heaven and all the saints to witness that there never was such an impossible recruit. From the right came Sergeant Lucinello with elephantine strides. He held his hands clasped on his belly, and shook his head in distress. From the other side approached Lieutenant Bianchelli. His eyes were no longer kind : they stared gloomily and reproachfully at the offender. Farther away, like a bronze statue, stood Captain Vitale. His large eyes, that never reflected any internal excitement, shone like metal in the sunlight ; but the bulging muscles, the colossal figure, expressed threatening contempt.

Captain Vitale passed down the lines with long strides.

' Method is everything, Bianchelli,' he said, half aloud. ' Method, corporal ! '

' Yes, captain ! ' Lantori's right hand flew to his hat-brim.

' Take this man—isn't his name Zirilli ?—and drill

him in the rifle exercise. If he cannot learn, he must practise during the dinner-hour. Quick march ! ’

Alfonso followed the corporal until they halted in the middle of the yard. There he stood upright and stiff in the heat of the sun, and ten, twenty, thirty times in succession he practised ‘shoulder arms’ and ‘order arms.’ The corporal was untiring ; he shouted the words of command without a break, wiping every now and then the sweat from his forehead. He was furious with the blockhead who caused him this extra work, and by Heaven he would not spare him.

‘Order arms !—smarter ! Shoulder arms !—hang it, get a move on ! Quicker ! . . . quicker ! Shoulder arms ! Order arms !—smarter ! Again ! ’

Captain Vitale kept his back to them the whole time ; but they knew that he would turn as quick as lightning if the corporal had granted himself or the recruit a second’s rest.

On the night of such a day, Alfonso, as he drew the bed-cover over him, could have bitten his teeth like a madman in the hem of the coarse material. Had his comrades not been such servile creatures, he might have made an attempt to rouse them. But no, he did not dare. The arrest, the punishment drill, and the fatigue duty dismayed him. He could no longer avoid his fate ; he would be crushed and pounded ; would be remoulded ; would become another being.

‘I will not ! ’ he cried ; ‘I will not ! . . . Will not ! . . . ’ He trembled with suppressed anger, threw himself restlessly from side to side, and then suddenly slept—to dream of the Revolution, the necessity of which he now saw clearer than ever. He waded up to his knees in

blood ; men, women, and children doubled up in death-agony before his eyes ; and a shiver ran down his back. He awoke perspiring, and looked around with eyes grown big with terror of the unavoidable. Was he on the point of going mad ? Or was he in hell ? In the prevailing darkness he could distinguish nothing. But he could hear. All around was the noise of heavy-breathing sleepers ; long drawn-out snores or broken smothered sounds ; . . . here and there one groaned in his sleep or babbled some incomprehensible words ; farther away he seemed to hear a faint sound of strangely broken lamentation, and quite close to him huddled a figure in unutterable torments. He was among the damned ; he was himself damned. A deep sigh fought its way out of his contracted breast. It almost seemed to him as if the unconscious sorrow of all these men was borne by him—the only waker among the sleepers.

But when day came and he was laid hold of by the Service—this perfect machine that worked so well that every attempt to rise against it had crushed him without damaging the machine—then Alfonso Zirilli was as wax, yielding, complaisant, and zealous in his duty. He fawned and waited on the sergeant, saluted the harmless corporal, and crouched with dog-like humility before the officers. From an endless distance Captain Vitale looked down on him ; his bright eyes said nothing, but the powerful muscles spoke. Lieutenant Bianchelli turned away and returned Alfonso's salute as if it were painful to him. The little lieutenant, with his girl-like, elegant hands and feet, was ashamed when he saw Alfonso's eye-service. The humility of recruits, in which he did not believe, was repugnant

to him, and he turned away in order to avoid showing open contempt for such transparent deceit.

‘Captain Vitale! this Zirilli . . .’

‘He!’ interrupted the captain with a warning laugh; ‘he will make an excellent soldier. Wait, my dear Bianchelli—only wait, I tell you. Look! the system—that is everything. Well, you will see.’

The lieutenant smiled a peculiar smile and looked away. It was no use discussing these things with Captain Vitale. His eminently military attitude forbade any close consideration of the moral constitution of the soldier-material. The uniform levels them all . . . then, full-stop. Thinking was a matter with which a soldier need not concern himself. Thinking was done in the War Office and by the general’s staff—what little of that sort of thing was necessary was supplied by others; the officers of the line did not trouble about such things, and the rank and file obeyed—absolutely nothing else but obeyed.

Lieutenant Bianchelli shook his head as he turned and left his superior. This Zirilli was a cunning creature; his eyes sometimes flared up strangely. When one added to this what one knew of his convictions, the fellow was indeed an unpleasant, disagreeable spectacle. If the lieutenant in the first place sympathised with the recruit, he now began to look on him with mistrust.

Alfonso, whom nothing escaped, marked the alteration in the behaviour of the lieutenant. He did not inquire into the cause; he foresaw the consequences, and, suddenly, a savage hatred sprang up in him.

‘This insignificant little chit—this ladybird,’ he thought, ‘wants to make himself important! It occurs

to him to despise my honourable exertions, and he turns up his nose. But wait ; some day, there is an end even to this misery . . . only wait.' In order to be able to hold out, Alfonso needed some one to hate. This Someone was now found.

Lieutenant Bianchelli was of an easy-going disposition and willingly led. He shut his eyes to many a side slip of the rank and file, in so far as it could happen without risk to himself. As the peculiar sidelong glances of Alfonso struck him more frequently, he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. After all, what had this unsympathetic person to do with him ? Alfonso smiled, after he had observed the lieutenant for a time. He had already succeeded in making an impression. . . . Good ! But he was careful to avoid getting in any way into trouble. Later on . . . after . . . only wait !

It was a different matter with the company commander. He took his task in a manner that made it twice as hard both for himself and for the men. He was untiring and ever-present ; not the smallest detail escaped him. On the parade-ground you were never safe for a moment from that penetrating eye ; in the barracks he constantly turned up ; and if the men, after a strenuous day, sat somewhere chatting in the shadow, he would suddenly appear at their side. Stern and unapproachable, he would glide by, leaving behind him the impression that even one's most secret thoughts were known to him.

The soldiers of the company went in fear of their commander. Alfonso felt that he was infected with this impersonal fear which Captain Manlio Vitale instilled in everybody. Many a time he dreamed that

his rifle went off by accident at target practice and the bullet struck the captain midway between those china-bright eyes. He was on his guard, however, not to let anything be heard of such fantasies. He was not such a fool as to throw away his whole life for a senseless revenge.

‘Wait!’ he murmured, ‘only wait!’

The declaration of war did not come altogether unexpected. Already, for some weeks, there had been rumours in the air. The rank and file were unmoved. Captain Vitale’s maxim, that the soldier should not think, but obey, had got into their blood.

Besides, it was not a serious war. One or two regiments, or perhaps a brigade, would be sent over the sea. The whole thing was a formality, and these precautionary measures were only undertaken to give more emphasis to the diplomatic negotiations. It was a case of acting quickly; afterwards, Europe would complaisantly acquiesce in the fact, and wink an intelligent consent to Italy’s action. All was made ready and put in order to the smallest detail.

Alfonso cowered against the walls of the officers’ mess, listening with all his ears. He had slipped out of his quarters, seen all the windows lighted up, and, urged by his curiosity, had ventured so far.

The officers were laughing and talking noisily. They were all of the opinion that the war meant a pleasant change in the soldier’s monotonous existence. The lieutenants pictured gallant adventures with fabulous Arabian beauties and the captains drank a glass of *vino nero*. They sat around a battalion commander, who never left off laughing.

Alfonso's uneasiness about the war, which he hated on principle, shrank to contempt. Those on the other side of the sea had nothing with which to defend themselves, they . . .

A powerful voice, with a familiar ring, now sounded above the others. In tones enthusiastic, glad and stately, Captain Vitale now took up the word. With chest expanded and moustache boldly bristling, he voiced the delight of his comrades in the turn affairs had taken in short military sentences, enlivened with many a forcible expression.

When the diplomats got their threads in a tangle, the soldier came along to cut the knot. In this case . . . er . . . well, they would see. When the regiment assembled to-morrow, the seventh company would show what it was made of. Each man would answer the question whether he wished to go with an instantaneous affirmative. It was really quite unnecessary, this calling for volunteers. A soldier should obey; execute commands—nothing more. But, at any rate, it made a good impression abroad; it was a reliable test of the nation's manner of thinking. The seventh company . . . well, you will see . . . what sort of temper . . . what enthusiasm. . . .

Alfonso went back to his quarters. 'Nothing but humbug!' he muttered.

The next morning the regiment formed a square on the parade-ground. From a distance that made it impossible to understand the words, the colonel addressed the soldiers. He closed with an appeal for volunteers to come forward.

Captain Vitale had turned round. His shining eyes passed along the front. His glance struck each

individual in turn and passed on to the next, third, fourth, and fifth.

Alfonso observed the captain through eyes half closed. An unconquerable aversion seized him ; he felt a repugnance towards the men around him, towards the life he led—a loathing that made him sick. He would no longer stand it. Away at any price ! He thrust the man before him to one side and stepped impulsively forward.

A quiver went through the ranks, all necks were stretched. Then Ambrogio Lorte came forward and after him Giovanni Feretto. Daniele Rapagnotti, the farmer whose goats they had smelt so long, was the next . . . then followed the whole squad.

They stood there like one man, clicked their heels together so smartly that the dust rose, and stood to attention without being asked. The first and third sections followed their example and marched a few paces forward. Corporal Lantori stamped up behind, unable to comprehend anything. Sergeant Lucinello opened his mouth and eyes in astonishment. Lieutenant Bianchelli, who had pressed forward when the men put themselves in motion, smiled in surprise, and his friend Lieutenant Rivarato laughed aloud with joy. Above everything rang Captain Vitale's powerful voice trembling with emotion.

‘ Thank you, men ! That is what I expected of you, and I thank you ! ’

The company heaved a sigh. The soldiers stuck out their chests and held up their heads. They were inspired and proud of the action which distinguished them over and above the others. But what was going on over there by the third and fourth companies ?

The officers were talking together excitedly. Sergeants and corporals ran up from all sides. And then . . . ah ! . . . a soldier, who screamed and struck out like a madman, was overpowered and borne away.

‘What now ?’ asked Captain Vitale.

And Lieutenant Rivarato, who stood nearest to this scene of excitement, pointed to his forehead and said aloud :

‘Gone off his head !’

‘Hush !’ Captain Vitale’s eyes acquired a shadow of expression which made him almost unrecognisable.

As if to wipe out the effect of the subaltern’s indiscretion, Captain Vitale bellowed to his company :

‘Comrades ! . . . once more, my thanks ! You are heroes . . . I . . .’

Emotion overcame him when he thought of the famous way his men had risen to the occasion. He went straight up to Alfonso. ‘Your hand, comrade, . . . you were the . . . er . . . I thank you !’ His left hand descended like a club on Alfonso’s shoulder, as he offered his right to the recruit.

The whole company saw their commander exchange a vigorous handshake with a private, and a buzz of pleasure went through the ranks. The painful scene beyond was forgotten, and when he returned to his place Captain Vitale was heard to say :

‘You see . . . er . . . method is everything. This very Zirilli . . . well, it has come off . . . I am satisfied. Learn from me, young Bianchelli !’

In the evening they all knew what had happened. A man had worried himself crazy about the war. More than a hundred men had heard him crying, unceasingly :

‘My wife! . . . my little daughter! . . . my wife! . . . my little daughter! . . .’

And not a man in the third or fourth company had come forward in reply to the colonel’s appeal. Fortunately Captain Vitale had saved the honour of the regiment. It was also rumoured that a corporal had shown signs of madness and was locked up—think of it, a corporal! The hum and buzz of conversation in the barracks did not cease till very late that night.

Alfonso Zirilli lay and listened. Again and again he asked himself what he had done. To be faithful to his creed he must hate war at any time. But . . . he could not help himself. A change he must have, at any cost, or he too would in the end . . . no . . . phew!

In the darkness some one sighed heavily, and then a sound like praying. . . . Near him, Rapagnotti the farmer wept in his sleep.

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The crossing to Africa was stormy and trying. The transport steamer rolled incessantly; the soldiers were seasick and longed for a sight of land. When the coast emerged above the horizon, all those who had strength enough broke out into a boisterous cheer.

The colonel appeared on the bridge and nodded. Behind him loomed the gigantic figure of Captain Vitale, now the most popular officer in the regiment. After the colonel had rejoiced a while in the cheering, he went into the cabin to write on the spot a telegram about the good temper of the troops. That would be sure to make an impression at home. Captain Vitale followed, twirling his moustache.

'Everything is going splendidly . . . er . . . When I think of those Turks . . . er . . . poor devils !'

The transport steamed past the colossal ironclads that lay at anchor in the roads. It was said that hundreds of volunteers had come forward for the fleet, but only a comparatively small number for the army.

'They don't know what it's like,' said Captain Vitale ; 'they . . . er . . . no idea. Anyhow, civilians . . . er . . . sooner be without them.'

The disembarkation took place with incredible swiftness. The soldiers stamped with impatience, and tumbled over each other into the boats and pinnaces. If they could only get out of this floating inferno, where the smell was enough to turn the best sailors sick, they wanted nothing more.

On the shore other soldiers were waiting. They examined the new-comers critically, laughing and passing remarks.

By degrees the regiment got into order. With firm ground under their feet their courage came back to them. . . . Good ! the worst was over. 'Well, you there, where are the Turks ?'

'Cleared out. Now and then a shot ; otherwise, quiet.'

All around joined in a laugh. Santissima Madonna ! what a crossing ! Waves as high as a house—a small house, perhaps, but still . . . the others should thank Heaven they had not experienced such a sea-voyage.

A staff-officer galloped up and asked for the colonel. He was not to be found ; had, presumably, immediately gone to see the commander-in-chief. The officer hurried away again.

A group of bare-legged Arabs, in dirty *burnouses*

stood at a street corner and stared at the strangers. A little way farther on, a few negroes babbled. The soldiers laughed at the Arab's yellow slippers ; that's the right footwear for running away. As soon as the negroes heard the laughter, they joined in and showed their white teeth. One man stood alone with a red cap on his head. He wore what looked like a uniform and kept his eyes half closed. What sort of a man is that ?—a Turk ?

'A policeman,' answered some one.

'Oh, is that all ? Well, he's nothing to be afraid of. Who takes any notice of what he says ? He belongs to the enemy. But—most important matter of all—where were the pretty women ?'

The staff-officer returned. What a business, riding about looking for some one who is nowhere to be found !

'Number seven company ? Captain Vitale ? Number seven company ?' The staff-officer galloped along the front calling his two questions.

'Here !' called Captain Vitale, and pierced the lieutenant, whose shouts annoyed him, with his eyes.

The officer drew rein and delivered his message.

'At his own request, Captain Vitale is commanded to report himself with the seventh company at . . . what's the name of the place ? It is a little village, about a mile south-west of the town. A battery of six guns and a detachment of sappers are already there.'

Captain Vitale's eyes blinked slightly. He had, indeed, asked as a favour that he with his company should be among the first sent to the firing-line ; but . . . so soon . . . well, well ! . . .

'Attention ! Dress ! By the right !'

The staff-officer had clean forgotten the name of the village; but it would be easy to find . . . the artillery, the sappers . . . well, then!

'Over there, captain!' He pointed to a row of houses above the harbour. 'According to the order, there should be a guide at this spot; but . . . well, good luck to you, captain! Over there. Due south through the city and then over to the right.'

Captain Vitale stroked his moustache with an evil-boding coolness. Lieutenant Rivarato clenched his teeth, and little Bianchelli shrugged his shoulders with vexation.

With a mixture of astonishment and curiosity, the soldiers gazed at these windowless houses with their well-bolted doors. They felt as if innumerable eyes looked out from these apparently forsaken dwellings. There was something hostile in the silence of these narrow empty streets. They purposely made as much noise as possible, stamping firmly on the ground. After a quarter of an hour they were obliged to halt in a cul-de-sac. Captain Vitale was annoyed. He ground a curse in his teeth, and asked Lieutenant Bianchelli if he had a map of the city with him.

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders.

'About turn!' The company marched out of the cul-de-sac. 'Knock at some door, one of you! There must be something besides dogs living in this damned town.'

Alfonso was out of the ranks in an instant and knocked with the butt of his rifle at the nearest door. The echo resounded through the house, but none answered.

The two lieutenants hurried up to the captain and

whispered officiously. Captain Vitale shrugged his shoulders and called to Alfonso :

‘ Cease knocking ! The house is empty.’

Alfonso fell back into the ranks. He was aggrieved at the way his zeal had been received.

A man in civilian dress, but with a military cap on his head, swung round the corner. He stopped suddenly, in astonishment at the long line of soldiers, and was about to turn back when Captain Vitale’s voice rang out :

‘ Hi, you there ! Do you speak Italian ? ’

‘ Just what I thought ! ’ With his hands in his trouser-pockets, the man came nearer ; ‘ lost your way, have you ? ’

The captain did not deign to answer, but Lieutenant Bianchelli, to whom the ridiculous element in the situation was painful, explained.

‘ I see ! About turn, lieutenant ! I wondered what on earth you could be after in the Jews’ quarter. . . . ’

‘ By the right ! Quick march ! ’ came the command, and the company set itself in motion. The captain kept next to the rear section, and left it to Bianchelli to walk with the guide chance had thrown in their way.

‘ Just arrived ? ’ asked the man in the *képi*, interested.

The lieutenant nodded.

‘ Strange ! ’ said the man, ‘ very strange ! Here are several thousand men who have nothing in the world to do, I tell you, lieutenant, absolutely nothing in the world. And they send a company to the front that is scarcely dry from its sea-voyage. Immediately . . . on the spot . . . if I were in the general’s shoes . . . ’

‘ Is it this street here ? ’ interrupted Bianchelli.

‘Straight on!’ declared the man officiously. ‘You cannot miss the way. There is the citadel just beyond, and then you see the road . . . there is a whole battalion there. ‘See you again! Good luck to you, comrades! Your servant, captain!’ The man attempted a military salute, nodded to the soldiers, bowed to the captain, and went on his way.

The latter did not return his salute, but stared straight in front of him. He was furious with himself. How could he lead his men so astray! To tramp about narrow streets in a circle, and then to depend on a doubtful subject, a semi-civilian, in order to . . . He pressed his lips together until they were white. But why was the promised guide not forthcoming? Did they expect him to find his way by himself in this mousehole? The captain snorted and gripped hold of the hilt of his sword. Where were the Turks? He wished he had them here. The rage that boiled in him needed some one on whom it could vent itself.

The exasperation of the captain infected the troops. There was something ludicrous in this wandering about; they felt it was unworthy of the company’s reputation. The soldiers looked around with angry eyes. The broad straight street through which they marched was not by any means empty, as were the streets in the Jewish quarter. Arabs stood talking here and there in groups; one or two red fezzes were visible outside a café.

‘Are those Turks?’ It was Rapagnotti, the young farmer, who put the question.

Alfonso shrugged his shoulders. He was not sure.

‘They are,’ answered Rapagnotti; and broke into a flood of curses. ‘The devil take you all!’ he threatened

with his rifle. 'To hell with you! I'll send you to perdition, damned red-caps! Get out of the way or I'll shoot you!'

'Quiet, there!' The captain stood on his toes to see who made the noise.

'Hold your tongue!' whispered Alfonso.

'They are Turks!' was Rapagnotti's excuse, and he almost put his neck out of joint looking back at the men who had roused his anger. Directly after, he cried plaintively: 'I am hungry!'

'Who isn't?'

Before and behind there was a murmur in the ranks. The men were dissatisfied, hungry, and tired. Instead of giving them a little rest to regain their strength after the strain of the sea-voyage, they were immediately sent away . . . God knows where!

Before the gates of the town stood a sentry; and scattered in all directions on the sand were soldiers of the line. A young lieutenant of artillery, almost a boy, waited by his horse.

'Captain Vitale? Number seven company?'

'Are you the guide?'

'I have been waiting here two hours.'

Captain Vitale drew himself up stiffly.

'Sir, we have marched here direct from the landing-stage.'

'I beg your pardon, captain! My expression . . . I did not mean. . . .'

'Kindly lead the way!'

Captain Vitale turned and took his place beside his company.

The young lieutenant became crimson in the face and hurried to Rivarato's side.

‘ A bear !—what ? ’

‘ Well, not exactly, but . . . ’ Lieutenant Rivarato looked back to see how near the captain was. ‘ I understand. ’ With the quickness of youth to jump to conclusions, the artilleryman winked his comprehension. ‘ Always to the right. There, farther to the south, lies Bu-Meliana, where we get our water from—when we get any. ’ He shrugged his shoulders and rode carelessly on.

The company swung out of the town, crossed over an old half-broken-down bridge, and curved round to the right. Close up to the town the ground was hard and firm ; but scarcely a hundred paces farther their feet sank deep in the soft sand. It was slow progress they made, with never a firm bit of ground. The soldiers glanced sideways at their captain. Would he give them no rest ? But the captain held himself straighter than ever, and his long legs were stretched in even longer strides than usual. Difficulties are made to be overcome. He marched on as if he neither heard nor saw. The men looked at each other. What did it mean ? Were they to go on till they dropped ? A violent dissatisfaction grew among them and passed through invisible channels from man to man. Somewhere in the rear a cough was heard, and soon half the company joined in. Captain Vitale turned his head and let his eye run over the rebels, who were silent at once. But now came a murmur from the front ranks. Lieutenant Bianchelli stole a glance at the captain. He had pushed a handkerchief under his hat, for the rim had made his forehead sore. It was also fearfully hot.

The sweat poured from their faces ; their breath came in dry gasps. There was not a breath of wind,

and the hot oppressive air was heavy with the odour of perspiration from the steaming ranks.

Captain Vitale went faster and reached the van.

‘Lieutenant, where can we get some water?’

‘Water? You should have brought it with you. They say the Arabs have fouled the few springs that there are, and nobody will risk . . .’

‘The Arabs? They are our friends?’

The artilleryman bent his head and looked at Captain Vitale.

‘I hardly think . . . hem! that we may call them friends.’

‘Why not?’ asked the captain; ‘it is the Turks with whom we are at war.’

‘The Arabs will not give anything for the Turks, that’s true. Nevertheless . . . to say the truth, captain, hatred is a poor word for their feelings towards us.’

Captain Vitale threw back his head, so that the feathers in his hat fluttered on all sides.

‘I am glad,’ he cried. ‘I prefer a clean game. So they do us the honour of hating us . . . really, I am sorry for them.’

From the ranks, where these remarks could be heard, arose a threatening murmur. With burning eyes the soldiers looked around. Everything in this strange land held something hostile; something inhospitable and repulsive. The yellow sand, dry and hot as ashes, the burning rays of the sun—this they were used to—the dense, prickly cactus-bushes and dark vegetation, with which some places were entirely overgrown, whilst others were left bare and dead. These contradictions, side by side, irritated them. Here and there

fig-trees and grey-green olives reminded them of the land they had left. And then there were palms. Indeed, there were thousands of them ; but they were ragged and bristly, nothing like the pictures which had been shown them on the voyage. But what annoyed the soldiers more than all were these little barred huts behind their high walls. Why did the people everywhere lock themselves in so carefully when the troops marched by ? Why did they not show themselves ? Should they not rather have met them waving their hands in welcome ? Surely, the victors have a right to expect so much !

The soldiers felt instinctively that displeasure and distrust, as well as heat, streamed out from these white walls. The company drew themselves up as one man. With clenched teeth and burning eyes, silently vowing vengeance, the troops advanced, now on hard ground that echoed their steady steps, now on soft sand that sank and slipped aside. The sun scorched, the sweat streamed from their tired flabby faces, and a suffocating odour hung like a cloud over the ranks.

The artilleryman in the van swung round a wall and disappeared. They were (thank Heaven !) on firm ground once more, and the soldiers quickened their steps. When they in turn reached the corner they discovered a battery of artillery behind a sand-hill that looked like a solidified wave. The young lieutenant spurred his horse and galloped up to a group of officers.

‘Halt ! Lie down !’ Captain Vitale signed to Lieutenant Rivarato to execute the order and hurried to meet the artillerymen.

‘The word of command had scarcely sounded when

the men flung themselves on the ground. They lay just as they fell, and coughed aloud. The sand filled their eyes, noses and mouths opened to snatch a breath of air.

Captain Vitale straightened himself.

'Here at last!' he cried out to a captain of artillery who hurriedly approached. He noticed that his own voice was dry and hoarse.

'Ah, Vitale! Welcome!' He was an old acquaintance, and they shook hands heartily. 'Not a moment too soon. . . .'

'What?' Captain Vitale withdrew his hand quickly.

'I did not mean it as a reproach,' whispered the artilleryman, and led him to one side; 'but you see, I have been here with my six guns for four-and-twenty hours—alone! Think of it, Vitale! No other guard but fifty sappers who had been sent to prepare the ground! They are there now to make things a little straight for you'—he pointed to the left. 'I am finished; can't do any more. You can understand the responsibility . . . and for miles around not a solitary infantryman! There was a gap here, and they filled it with my battery. Last night we never shut our eyes. But now we'll make up for it. In the meantime, I leave everything in your hands. The men are so nerve-strained that the slightest sound startles them. The nights are awful, Vitale. You can't see your hand before your eyes, but you can *hear* . . . I don't know if it's Arabs or dogs or what. I have forbidden the troops to fire; but whether they have obeyed . . .'

He shrugged his shoulders, and went on in the same breath: 'Farther to the south they have been hard at it, and any minute it may begin again. They glide by

in the dark, alarming the sentries and tempt them to shoot. And at the first shot, all the men will wake out of their sleep and blaze away their cartridges . . . in all directions.'

'Have you any water?' put in Captain Vitale as the other stopped a moment for breath.

'Not a drop! It is a case of "everyone for himself." Where is the regimental transport? The others are following soon?'

Vitale shrugged his shoulders.

'We came straight from the ship,' he said angrily.

'Yes, of course. There sit some of the gentlemen of the staff in front of their maps and measure with their compasses. So many men here and so many there—that's right; one battery on the left and one on the right. Such details as hunger and fatigue are not inquired into. When we reach the spot, the lie of the land is impossible, or there is a total lack of water and other little agreeable surprises. This morning we finished our reserve stores; and if to-morrow we do not get supplies the men will be out of hand. They have had trials enough without this.'

Captain Vitale chewed his moustache.

'Now you are responsible,' went on the artilleryman. 'I can't keep my eyes open another minute. Do me a favour and leave a section over there with the battery. I cannot be sure of my men—so nerve-strained . . . you know.' He yawned emphatically and stretched himself. 'Would you believe they have sent away two of my guns—no man knows where. Good-night, Vitale! Sleep well, but with one eye open!' He turned about and went off with dragging steps.

Captain Vitale returned to his exhausted company. He threw out his chest and squared his shoulders; he was himself again. The half-suppressed murmur of the men, at being disturbed so soon, passed unheeded.

A little while later the troops had taken cover behind a ruinous wall, on which the engineers in the course of the day had executed just as much repair as was absolutely necessary. It was late in the afternoon, and hunger overcame the men. Ambrogio Lorte, the printer, sobbed softly. He had suddenly thought of his mother; and, meditating on this for a while, he came to the conclusion he was about to die. Feretto, to whom he confided his sad forebodings, shook his head gloomily.

Rapagnotti, the young farmer, had not even unstrapped his knapsack, but sat there with his rifle between his legs and stared at the ground.

‘I am hungry,’ he muttered between his teeth. ‘O Lord, I am hungry!’

Alfonso lay on his stomach and chewed at an ear of halfa grass—that at least moistened his tongue.

The comrades glanced at Lorte and exchanged a half-spoken thought, but forbore to speak of the unhappy fellow. A heavy depression weighed down all their spirits.

Captain Vitale gave Lieutenant Rivarato the last orders—the lieutenant was to push forward with his section on outpost duty.

‘Over there!’ explained a sergeant of engineers, and pointed. ‘We have demolished a house that stood in the way, and marked out the trenches. To-morrow . . .’

'Was anyone living in the house?' asked Rivarato, looking thoughtfully at the spot.

'Of course! We drove them away.'

'If by six o'clock nothing has arrived, we shall have to start on the emergency rations,' grumbled Captain Vitale. 'I'll send out a patrol! . . .' He yawned, shrugged his shoulders, and said sleepily: '*A rivederci!*'

A few minutes later the first section marched away and disappeared behind one of the wave-like sand-hills. Not one of those left behind turned his head. Indifferent, tired, and exhausted, they lay stretched out on the hot sand.

Captain Vitale crept into one of the abandoned huts that the company had taken possession of. He was driven out immediately by the dirt and smell. He yawned aloud. In another second he threw himself on the ground; in the next he was asleep.

After an hour or so darkness fell, and with it came sudden cold. The soldiers awoke from their leaden slumber with chattering teeth. There were impatient exclamations, and restless movements were manifest in all directions.

'Zirilli!'

'Is that you, Rapagnotti?'

'I'm ravenous!' said the man of the fields in a tone which reminded Alfonso of a dog when it is roused.

Alfonso shrugged his shoulders. During the last month he had changed more and more. His desire for vengeance, his stubbornness, and, above all, his faith in his ideas, had been slowly and surely ground out of him. For a long time now he had had the feeling that his brain was hollow and empty. It was all a

matter of indifference to him ; he hoped for a change, and yet he did not care. One must take things as they come, and wait for release.

He stood up, silently, and strained his eyes to distinguish his comrades. He felt, rather than saw, how a shadow in the darkness glided out and came after him.

‘ Have you brought your rifle ? ’ asked Rapagnotti softly.

Alfonso growled an affirmative.

‘ In that direction there ’s a village,’ whispered the other. ‘ I saw it while we were resting this afternoon.’ He added quickly, and the growl of an angry dog sounded in his words : ‘ I must have food ! ’

They groped in the darkness, found the path, and followed it for a while.

‘ There ! ’ said Rapagnotti.

Alfonso perceived a faint light in the distance.

They climbed a slope, felt their way along a wall, and made for the light. Rapagnotti knocked at a door with the butt of his rifle.

The light that had shown them the way was extinguished. No one answered from within.

Rapagnotti searched for the latch, found it, and opened the door.

‘ Have you a match, Zirilli ? ’

Alfonso was roused by the adventure ; the suspense braced his nerves. He pulled out a box of vestas and passed them to his comrade, who found his hand at once.

Rapagnotti struck a match and lit up the room. They distinguished an Arab, who cowered against the white wall opposite. Two children turned anxious

eyes on the intruders ; a woman stood up hastily, and drew her veil over her face. The match went out.

When Rapagnotti lit another, the woman had disappeared, and the Arab risen up. His face was unmoved, but his attitude showed he was ready to defend himself.

Rapagnotti struck a third match, and entered. On a low octagonal table he discovered a lamp, which he succeeded in lighting without letting his rifle out of his hand. The remains of the match described a curve in the air, and as he shook his burnt fingers he cried in triumph :

‘ Well, wasn’t I right ? There is their supper.’

Near the lamp stood an earthen dish filled with a large portion of *kous-kous*. The legs of a boiled fowl stuck out of the heaped-up rice.

Rapagnotti knelt down by the table and began to eat. His powerful jaws pounded the food. His rifle lay in the hollow of his left arm ; his right hand dug into the rice. His hat had slipped over his ear, the plumes drooping over his shoulder. He made a grotesque picture of greedy haste.

Alfonso remained standing inside the door and gazed on the scene. The proprietors of the house were relieved, and showed neither curiosity nor surprise ; the children crept behind their parents, and now and then a head peeped out. No one spoke till Rapagnotti asked for ‘ water.’

After he had repeated the word several times, the Arab understood. At a sign from him a boy of about eight years dragged a large stone pitcher on to the table.

Rapagnotti nodded, and went on eating. When

his hunger was somewhat appeased, he cast a glance over his shoulder at Alfonso.

‘ Won’t you . . . ? ’

He completed the sentence by cramming another handful in his mouth.

Alfonso shrugged his shoulders. It was really rather funny. Standing up, he began to take part in this strange meal. Rapagnotti nodded to him to go on ; there was plenty of rice left.

After they had eaten and drunk, Rapagnotti wiped his hands on the wall. Then he grinned with satisfaction and said :

‘ I was sick all the time on the crossing ; I should certainly have died if I had not got something to eat.’

Alfonso had eaten but little ; the strong spices burnt his throat and caused him an attack of coughing. But he drank the more.

Without once looking directly at their guests, the Arabs, nevertheless, let none of their movements escape them. Except Rapagnotti, none had uttered a word.

‘ Have you finished ? ’ he asked ; and, as Alfonso looked up, he said, with a stupid cunning smile : ‘ Don’t be alarmed ; I won’t say your name so that anyone can hear it.’

He was pleased with himself, and laughed with gratification. While Alfonso cleaned the remains of the food from his hands, his comrade looked into the living-room. A small pitcher in the corner aroused his curiosity, and he lifted it up. The Arab made as if to prevent him ; but Rapagnotti struck the butt end of his gun on the floor, and the other resumed his motionless attitude. When Rapagnotti shook the

pitcher, a sound of metal was audible. He put it down quickly, as if it burnt his fingers.

‘Let us go!’

He slipped through the low door, Alfonso after him, wondering in silence what the hasty sidelong glances of his companion meant.

They were soon on the path, groping along in the darkness.

‘Do you think you could find your way here again?’ asked Rapagnotti suddenly.

‘No.’

‘But I could.’ He laughed, but stopped at once and asked: ‘Did you hear what was in that jug?’ Before Alfonso could reply, he went on: ‘Money, my lad! money!’ His voice trembled with awe; it sounded deep and resonant, as if it had acquired some of the ring of the metal itself. ‘Money!’ he repeated, ‘not very much—perhaps two handfuls; but . . .’ He stopped in the middle of his stride and pulled Alfonso up with a sudden jerk.

‘If I had asked for it, do you think that fellow would have refused?’

‘It is strictly prohibited . . .’

‘I know that,’ interrupted Rapagnotti impatiently. ‘But if I had asked—not in the least threatened—merely asked? He would certainly have answered yes.’

Alfonso laughed aloud. Here was he, the anarchist, in the act of dissuading this model soldier from a deed of violence!

‘Well, and what then?’ he asked.

Rapagnotti became eager. He told of the hardships and misery of their little mountain village where men

and beasts lived together. One springtime in particular was impressed on his memory. The winter had been frightful ; the cattle died of starvation, and his own father . . . Rapagnotti stifled a sob and struck his breast with his clenched fist. In short, it came to a bread-riot. Men, women, and children from his own and five or six neighbouring villages marched one bright spring-day towards the coast—towards a town full of rich, well-clothed and well-fed citizens. They also would eat ; they called for help ; they claimed their rights. They began by cutting down one of those acacia-trees so numerous in the south, and made a clumsy attempt to set fire to a custom-house. At a bend in the road they came upon a body of soldiers, *bersaglieri*, in almost the same uniforms as they themselves were now wearing. ‘ Back, or we fire ! ’ was their greeting to the peasants, who came shouting and screaming down the hill.

Only the foremost heard the words ; the others pressed forward, crying : ‘ Justice ! Relief ! Bread ! ’ By way of answer, a harsh voice behind the soldiers croaked out ‘ Fire ! ’ The rifles blazed ; shouts and screams, anger, fear and lamentations, and then the patter of innumerable sandalled feet as the mob of peasants scattered in indiscriminate flight. ‘ *Bersaglieri*—they were wearing the same uniform that I have on now, Zirilli—stormed up the road. They did not seem to see little twelve-year-old Daniel crying, transfixed with fear over his fallen father, whose knee had been shattered by a bullet.’

There was nothing further. With the help of some kindly Samaritan, they eventually reached their own village. There was no doctor ; nor would it have been

wise to apply to one, for fear of the inquiries that might ensue. Old Rapagnotti died in the course of the summer ; he could not endure starvation any longer.

Alfonso meditated. There was nothing uncommon about a hunger-riot there in the south. At the printer's where he worked, they had exact information about such things.

Rapagnotti talked on. His whole childhood and youth had been one long struggle against starvation. He was differently constructed from most people : he needed more food. . . . Oh, how hungry he had been ! But, on that account, he could eat more than other people when there was anything to eat.

Alfonso put his hand on his comrade's shoulder and began to talk in his turn. In the darkness of the night he sketched out his vague, nebulous ideals ; while the palms rustled over their heads he told of the dream of the future, which was to be realised after the Great Revolution : ' You see, the Great Revolution which . . . '

But Rapagnotti shook off his comrade's hand. That was all nonsense. The priest had warned them against it. Zirilli should not come and put these fancies into his head. No ; a sensible man got hold of money—that was the way to happiness. Money—as much money as possible—that was the chief thing. Money, before everything—money. In his southern covetousness, he repeated the word again and again. Suddenly he pressed close to Alfonso and whispered :

' I know where to find money. The Arabs have all got it hidden in their houses. For years I have prayed to the Madonna Addolorata to lead me to a spot where there was money. Now, at last, she has heard me. We

are at war, you know,' and he piously made the sign of the Cross over the mouth of his rifle.

Alfonso bit his lip. These parsons—their confounded black coats—were to be met with everywhere. Was there any truth in the rumour that this was really their war? Had they brought it about in order to obtain in time a large profit for the coffers of their church?

'Money!' repeated Rapagnotti obstinately. And then he added in an anxious whisper: 'You won't tell anyone?'

Alfonso promised to hold his tongue. They had reached the camp by now, and slipped into the ranks of their comrades, guided by their snores. Rapagnotti curled himself up, grasping his rifle with both hands. Alfonso leant against the wall behind him. He felt something going on in his mind. His brain, that had lain so long like a dead lump, began to work and bring forth thoughts. At first slow and laboured, they now came faster and faster.

Alfonso laughed spitefully. He perceived the confusion behind this apparent order; he grasped how impossible it was to control this complicated machinery. That was the reason why they were always so fearfully anxious about polishing up the details. Every link fitted extraordinarily well; but when they were joined, friction ensued, and little unevennesses came to light. Hundreds of contentious wills crossed each other and occasioned certain strife. And somewhere on the other side, far away in the desert, were other wills, which never ceased to contrive how they could bring to naught the schemes and endeavours of the Italians. Force, lies, and cunning—in a word, all that a righteous man

abominated and looked on as degradation—was here exalted to a duty.

Alfonso gave vent to a deep moaning sigh. He saw clearly ; he knew what he had to think.

‘ It is war ! ’ he said aloud, and with the satisfaction of a man who, in spite of everything, sees his way.

A shadow approached, and passed by at a short distance.

‘ Ah, they have posted sentries ! ’ thought Alfonso. Of course, Captain Vitale was a perfect soldier. He nodded sleepily ; he was pleased that he had found a way out of the labyrinth in which his thoughts still wandered. He stretched his legs and shut his eyes. The short period of cold, that followed immediately after sunset, had long since changed to a grateful warmth. A gentle wind rustled in the palms. The stars shone in the infinite—the same stars that shone over his own land.

On the following morning the second battalion arrived quite early and encamped next to the seventh company. The officers crowded round Captain Vitale and Lieutenant Bianchelli.

Anything happened ? Absolutely nothing ! If there were any Turks at all, they were certainly not here. Rivarato had reported, too, that nothing had been seen or heard all night.

The sudden marching off of the seventh company had caused much amusement. It was really too good ! An over-zealous staff-officer had misunderstood some remarks which fell from the lips of the commander of the brigade, and hurried away. When the colonel came back, he expressed himself in terms more forcible than polite.

Captain Vitale straightened himself, and twirled the ends of his moustache.

‘ A soldier is always ready ! ’ he said proudly.

Alfonso, who was standing near the officers, nodded. He understood better and better. An order misunderstood, or indistinctly given, might mean the destruction of half a regiment. He smiled faintly, and slipped away.

The regiment that had occupied a position between two villages (whose names no one knew at the time) all the night before, was now to form a long line of defence. Axe and spade were brought into use. Palm-trees came crashing to the ground and were busily dragged away. It was true the palms were a necessity of existence in this country ; but they were also excellent supports for the breast-works. The trenches were pegged out, and hundreds of soldiers set the sand flying in clouds. Bent backs were to be seen in all directions ; innumerable busy hands in motion, while the spades clashed in the gravel. The product of centuries of untiring labour was destroyed in a few minutes. When a house stood in the way, it was blown up with dynamite : they scarcely gave the inhabitants time to gather their most treasured possessions. Then away with them whither they would. An unheard-of energy was developed ; an incredible amount of strength wasted. It would have been impossible in time of peace to obtain such a motive power for any useful purpose.

Some of the inhabitants of the district, who for several days had kept their doors obstinately locked, now made tentative efforts towards a *rapprochement*. They were cut short with a furious glance or brutally

snubbed. Those who had not troubled, or understood, how to win them in the first place, now regarded them with contempt and distrust. When an officer was compelled by circumstances to consult the head man of a village, or other distinguished Arab, he addressed him in a tone of haughty command. The soldiers observed this, and imitated their superiors. As there was seldom an interpreter to hand when needed, they made themselves understood with the aid of their fists or the butts of their rifles. For the rest, there was no lack of evil hate-laden glances on the other side. A mutual bitterness brooded over their feelings.

In addition to the strenuous work to which the soldiers were driven, they were tormented with gloomy presentiments. They all perceived that a great—a fatal—mistake had been made. Impatience and discontent radiated from the staff to the officers, and these imparted the same feelings to the troops.

‘Perhaps, the whole war . . .,’ thought Alfonso, who had again begun doubting and questioning.

The certainty that they were being driven forward to make good the errors of people they would never see, annoyed every one. Here they were digging away in the sand . . . why? . . . yes, why? Wherever they turned they were mocked by questions, but nowhere did they find an answer.

In the end everything annoyed them. The bare suspicion that they were playing a part in a fool’s comedy roused them to fury. They yearned for a fight with these Turks that they never saw, and yet at the same time they wished to avoid it.

Alfonso studied his comrades while he and they were at work. The feeling that he was an insignificant

and easily replaceable part of the whole was never so prominent as now. When his companions were depressed, he became sad ; when they aired their contempt or displeasure, he thoughtlessly followed their example. It was as if they all saw and felt in exactly the same manner.

Rapagnotti was the only exception. He worked harder than the others ; ate twice as much, and slept like a corpse. Sometimes, when looking at this excellent machine, Alfonso asked himself if he had dreamed the adventure of a few nights ago. His comrade seemed indifferent to everything.

Then at last came the battle. One night, south of them, the Turks pushed forward a preparatory reconnaissance.

As Alfonso leant against the breast-work of the trench, and watched the firing, like sparks flying about in the far distance, he asked himself what did it all mean. To understand it, one must reverse all one's previous conceptions ; must think backwards. They were all mad together—ha, ha, ha ! . . . Suddenly he broke off, astonished and confused.

The third man on his left had also begun to laugh—loudly, violently, but with a hollow senseless ring.

'That is Lorte,' thought Alfonso.

'Silence ! Keep quiet, there !'

Lieutenant Bianchelli's thin girl-like voice trembled ; his 'keep quiet, there' was almost swallowed in a gasp.

But Lorte laughed without ceasing—a dry, rattling laugh—which made the soldiers shiver.

Far away to the south the rifles cracked. The noise rose and fell ; for a minute drowning every other sound, and then dying down to a distant rattle. Then

Lorte's sobbing laugh was clearly audible; for now he was sobbing as well.

The men in the firing-line showed signs of unrest. They crowded together, burying their hands in the sand of the breast-work or nervously fingering the triggers of their rifles.

Then the noise grew loud again; fire flashed out and died away; in some places, whole sheets of flame together; in others, singly and far apart. Now and then guns boomed heavily. A rocket shot up, hissing into the sky, and fell in a wide curve to the earth.

Captain Vitale whispered excitedly to Lieutenant Bianchelli:

'That won't do . . . have him taken away!'

The firing to the south became fainter. A last gun-shot crashed. Then all was silent.

Lieutenant Bianchelli had called Corporal Lantori, and together they were taking the still loud-laughing Lorte out of the ranks.

'Another man!' he cried, in a smothered voice.

Rapagnotti hurried up. 'I'm horribly hungry,' he whispered to Alfonso.

Lorte was led away. They heard his sobbing laugh growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

'I will not go mad!' murmured Alfonso. He tore open his tunic, pushed his hand under his shirt, and clawed his breast with his nails. 'I will not go mad . . . anything rather than that. . . .'

The second section leant against the breast-works and stared into the night. Nothing happened. They strained their senses to the utmost; listened for a sound in the silence; stared into the darkness. They longed for the hubbub of battle to begin again; for the flashes

to blaze up again on the horizon . . . for something to happen. Anything rather than this unbearable suspense that exposed them to the strangest misgivings.

In some places whispered questions and answers were exchanged.

‘It is over for the present,’ Captain Vitale’s voice was heard at the back. ‘We have dusted their coats to some purpose.’

This was a relief, and rejoiced all hearts. It is true they had only been spectators of the fight; yet they had, in a way, contributed in the rout of the enemy. It was known that they were there; that was sufficient. This led them to think of the huge number they contributed to. The men conceived a vague notion of the powerful machine of which they formed a tiny part. In the third section some one began to sing a comic song half aloud.

Rapagnotti came back and jumped heavily into the trench. He smelt of wine, and licked his lips.

‘A little behind the artillery they have a large hospital. A hospital orderly gave me a drink of wine,’ he told them. ‘Lorte? Oh, nothing serious. When an opportunity occurs he will be sent home.’

‘Home?’

Feretto’s voice trembled with ill-disguised envy.

‘Temporary aberration,’ explained Rapagnotti importantly. ‘But three fellows from number four company are much worse—you remember one of them went raving mad before . . .’

‘Silence, there!’ sounded the voice of Captain Vitale.

‘He is everywhere at once,’ whispered Rapagnotti

crossly to Alfonso. The wine had put the countryman in a good humour, and he wanted to talk.

At midnight the sentries were doubled ; the rest of the troops could sleep.

The officers collected in groups, and conversed in undertones. An attack might be expected at any minute. Perhaps at daybreak. It was only a question whether it would be directed against their regiment, which occupied rather an advanced position.

The colonel appeared in the company of a staff-officer and passed by.

‘ My men are not sufficient ! Make that clear to the general ! ’ he said excitedly. ‘ This wing is in the air—unsupported. I want . . . No, I must have . . . ’

More than this the officers did not hear.

Suddenly Lieutenant Bianchelli began to laugh aloud like a child that is tickled till it is out of breath. The laugh broke from his white lips and rose to an attack of hysterics that shook his delicate frame.

‘ Good heavens ! . . . my dear Bianchelli . . . Keep up ! ’ Captain Vitale threw his arm, like a father, round the lieutenant’s shoulders and led him away. ‘ Quickly now ; a drop of brandy . . . Has anyone a drop of brandy ? ’

A pocket electric light illuminated Bianchelli’s pale face. The lieutenant’s eyes were moist with tears of grief and pain. He stared helplessly at the others. Some one held out a pocket-flask, which was immediately seized in Captain Vitale’s huge fist.

‘ Here, Bianchelli ! A good drink ! The poor fellow has not shut his eyes for three nights ! Simply overstrain ! Now, head up ! Another drop ! ’ Captain Vitale led the lieutenant away, and his friendly

admonitions, mingled with the lieutenant's spasmodic laughter, died away slowly among the palms.

The group of officers had become silent, until one of them shrugged his shoulders and muttered 'good night !'

Their hands went up in salute ; and, directly after, their steps were heard in the sand as they parted in different directions.

' Good night ! '

At daybreak the guns behind the regiment began to thunder. Half asleep, the men of number seven company tumbled over one another into the trenches. They spied eagerly between the palm-trees, their rifles resting on the breast-works. The first section had fallen back, and waited in reserve with the artillery. Here and there a cloud of sand spun round or floated by. All at once the soldiers blazed away, and cried :

' The Turks ! . . . the Turks ! '

From the southward rattled an unbroken rifle fire—a monotonous music to which the cannons played a bass.

Alfonso cowered in his place. He sweated with excitement, but managed to keep his self-control. Feretto and his two neighbours turned continually aside, laughing and apparently talking together.

Suddenly something whistled over Alfonso's head. He shrank involuntarily, and peeped at his comrades. They were nearly all crouched at the bottom of the trench. Over their heads the bullets whistled and hummed unceasingly—ringing like hard, far-reaching whip-strokes. They followed one after another ; beginning with an angry hiss, and increasing immediately

to a rushing sound that was cut through in the same instant by the next. An unbroken shower of bullets tore the air about two yards above their heads. They whined and whistled and hissed and spat. It was an indescribable torture : a moan of lament, a tormenting whine. The nerves of the soldiers soon went to pieces under these whizzing showers that seemed to go on for ever.

The men in the trenches poked their rifles over the breast-work and fired in the air. They had lost all power of thought ; their feelings were in a whirl. After a while they became accustomed to the noise in the air. The Turks fired too high ; so far, no one was wounded. A feeling of contempt arose for an enemy who seemed incapable of hurting them. One head after another appeared above the breast-work with frowning protruding eyes that stared straight ahead ; but they could discover nothing. Nothing but a row of wave-like sand-hills. Here and there a thin veil of smoke drifted in the wind.

All around rifles rattled and guns boomed.

‘ Sight at 800 yards ! ’ roared Captain Vitale.

Non-commissioned officers repeated the command ; but, although everyone heard, scarcely anyone obeyed. With feverish impatience the men blazed their cartridges away, flinging pounds of bullets into the sand. It was a case of outdoing the enemy in noise ; of making oneself deaf to what was happening. Unbroken activity ; continuous occupation ; no pause for thought. A storm of lead rattled out of the barrels, and was scattered over the sand.

Alfonso fired like his comrades. He took no aim : indeed, there was nothing to aim at. Mechanically he

inserted cartridges into the breech and pressed the trigger. Suddenly he started and looked round. Some one touched him . . . what was this? Sergeant Lucinello lay at full length on the ground. He held both hands over his mouth; blood trickled through his fingers. And, yonder, Corporal Lantori tottered out of the lines. His faithful dog-like eyes told of fear and astonishment; they had lost every trace of human expression. Alfonso's blood ran cold. Something inexplicable, something dangerous, was going on; something . . . Feretto fell heavily forward, slid under the wall, and lay like a stone. His comrade, the second man from Alfonso, turned round and stared up at a cactus-hedge that lay thirty or forty paces to the rear. Did he think the danger came from there?

'There lie the Turks!' cried Alfonso, and pointed to the opposite side.

From all sides questions and answers were shouted. Lieutenant Bianchelli, who had a red weal right across one cheek—it looked as if he had been hit with a stick—waved his sword and issued some command.

Down in the trenches the men were gathered together in helpless bewildered groups. They roared and gesticulated; shook their rifles and stamped on the ground. Tall, strong and savage, Captain Vitale towered above the crowd. The sword in his hand described furious curves; pointing not forwards, but back towards the cactus-hedge on the slope behind.

Alfonso tried to think. Were they surrounded? Yes, certainly; there came flashes between the fleshy cactus-leaves. From yonder hillock they were being shot at.

From Rapagnotti's throat came a hoarse roar. It sounded as if some prehistoric monster, awakened from a century of sleep, crouched for a decisive spring. Round about other hoarse shouts replied to the summons of Rapagnotti's war-cry.

The men raised their heads; their eyes glowed; they pointed with wide-open mouths. Lieutenant Bianchelli sprang out of the trench, the whole section after him. A universal howl rose from their dry throats. Their lowest instincts rose to the surface; mental defects and deformities came to light. Alfonso made a renewed attempt to think. He fell into a rage when he found it beyond him.

He clawed the sand with his nails, climbed over the edge, and began to run. Comrades ran on either side of him. Their faces had lost all human semblance; they were brutes. It flashed through Alfonso's brain that he should not give way to this impulse which drove him forward with the others; but he could not hold back. He was taken up and washed on in this flood of brutish cries and maniac ravings. He became one with the others, and roared as they did, as long as he had breath in his lungs.

The section rushed madly down the slope. On the right a company of infantry appeared, as if conjured out of the ground, and ran in the same direction.

Alfonso saw Lieutenant Bianchelli plunge through an opening in the cactus-hedge. The first and second sections stormed after him. Alfonso himself had gone too far to the left; he turned, and ran along the hedge. He ran straight into a wall, and fell back cursing. Everything seemed arranged to increase his fury. Running into a wall . . . hang it! . . . no!

Ha! he found an opening and rushed into the enclosure. Something whisked by. No uniform, so he fired.

A shrill cry of pain replied. He had shot a woman! What business had a woman to be about on such a day? Beside himself, he let fly again.

'Hi! Zirilli!' It was Rapagnotti that called. 'Over here, comrade!'

Alfonso hurried in the direction of the voice.

'Here we are . . . don't you recognise the house?'

They flung themselves over a low wall, and Alfonso cursed again; he had fallen on his knees. Rapagnotti darted through a low door into the house. Alfonso heard the sound of something being smashed to pieces, and, immediately after, women and children screaming with fright.

'Thieves! . . . Traitors . . .!' raged Rapagnotti, beside himself with exasperation.

Alfonso entered, and bumped his head against the lintel. Everything on this accursed day seemed in conspiracy to hurt and hinder him.

In the middle of the room stood Rapagnotti, who thrust with the butt of his rifle at a woman who cowered in a corner. Two children hid in terror behind their mother.

'I have been cheated!' screamed Rapagnotti. 'Look, look! the pitcher is empty! They have stolen my money!' He pointed to the fragments on the floor. 'Thieves! . . . rascals! . . .'

Alfonso had to laugh. The other was so ridiculous in his fury. He said—though not out of pity for the woman and children who were half dead with fear:

‘There is plenty more . . . in other places.’

Rapagnotti lowered his head like a bull about to charge, and tried to collect his thoughts.

‘If we make haste, before the others get there, then . . .’

He hurried out of the door, Alfonso after him. He was glad to follow another’s lead ; he did not want to think, only to do as the others did.

‘There is the house of the head man of the village, he . . .’

The rest of the sentence was swallowed in an irregular salvo that was fired from behind the cactus-hedge. They met a score or so of infantrymen, who escorted in their midst several old men, women, and children ; and Rapagnotti again gave vent to his savage roar. The soldiers replied in the same manner ; and one of them began, without the least occasion, to thump an old man in the back with his rifle. Rapagnotti looked back and laughed.

A crowd of women and children had taken refuge in the house of the head man. A confused medley of veils, arms, legs, and clothes of various colours, was crowded into a corner. Rapagnotti plunged his hand with a roar into this living heap and snatched a veil. The shrivelled, death-white face of an old woman met his eyes. Rapagnotti hissed with rage, spat, and shouted :

‘Money ! . . . money ! . . .’

A trembling hand pointed to an adjacent room. With one leap Rapagnotti was in it. He was guided by instincts which, until now, had slumbered in the depths, and to-day came to the surface.

There was a sound of repeated blows, of something

smashed and scattered over the threshold. Then a cry of delight rang out.

Alfonso remained standing, leaning on his rifle. Suddenly he thought of Lorte and began to laugh. And now, all at once, his mind began to work easily and logically. While the laughter lay on his lips his brain filled with thoughts ; freely, without effort, they followed one after another.

A convulsive shiver ran through the heap of woman-kind ; wide-open horrified eyes gazed up in an agony of fear at the motionless figure that leant on his rifle and laughed—laughed unceasingly—softly, gently, and kindly.

Rapagnotti appeared again. His trouser-pockets bulged, and several copper coins overflowed from them on to the floor ; but he did not deign to stoop for them—he had plenty.

‘Madonna Addolorata, I thank thee !’ He prayed and crossed himself devoutly. And in a sudden access of generosity he held out a handful of money to Alfonso.

‘*Grazie*, comrade !’ Alfonso put the money in his pocket ; to refuse it would have been mere stupidity. He nodded ; and, obeying a sudden impulse, he shouted :

‘Long live anarchy !’

Rapagnotti was at his side in an instant.

‘I won’t have that !’ he said threateningly.

‘No, of course ! . . .’ Alfonso laughed loudly and cheerfully ; at last all was clear. He needed an opportunity for an outbreak, and he shouted with all his strength :

‘Long live war !’

An expression of satisfaction passed over the face of Rapagnotti.

‘That’s right!’ he roared; ‘three cheers for war!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ laughed Alfonso immoderately at the thought of what was going on all round.

On the right hand sounded shot after shot; while women wailed and begged for mercy, and children vented their fear in shrill screams. To the left . . . What was that? Hurrah! Some officers were playing at target practice. The target was a group of Arabs, who had been driven into a corner made by two garden walls. And, yonder, a number of men, women, and children were being driven along with bayonets and heavy blows from rifle butts. If one stumbled he was whipped up at once. It was a horrible man-hunt of uninterrupted blows, kicks, and shooting.

‘Long live anar . . .!’ No; it was a crime to say that. ‘Long live war!’ that was it. That was laudable and patriotic, signified courage and bravery, and was rewarded.

The scales had fallen from his eyes, he saw and understood. War was anarchy—organised, perfected. The long period of probation during which he had ground his teeth and suffered the torments of the damned, had been necessary for this.

Alfonso ran down the road. He wished to see the horror in the brown faces, to hear the screams of lamentation, to tread on live bodies that writhed beneath his feet. Above, they were baiting the prisoners; yonder . . .

Every war was an outbreak of anarchy. To think that he had not seen that at once! One attacked another in the hope that he was the weaker. If one

succeeded in stealing a province, it was celebrated in poetry and prose. The result justified the meanest attack. If one could keep what was stolen, one deserved the victory.

In this universal eruption of hate, spite, and savagery, Alfonso found his thoughts lukewarm and immaterial. War was the apotheosis of crime—in comparison with which all else seemed equally small and insignificant.

Look ! there rolled a dying Arab in the sand, a few paces from the hospital over which fluttered the red cross on a white ground !

Four or five doctors observed with curiosity his convulsive movements. An officer, an elegant dandy, in spite of dust and dirt, was handling a camera ; he wished to take a photograph of this scene to keep as a souvenir.

‘ Long live war ! ’ roared Alfonso, as he ran by him. He had reversed his mind, and thought backwards ; it was over. And all the hundreds and thousands of ordinarily decent righteous citizens thought as he did and acted as he did. Yes ; they acted, while he indulged in fancies. Where was that troop of prisoners that he had just been following ? Ah, over there ! He loaded his rifle, and began to overtake them with long strides.

While he hastened forward his mind still worked in this new direction. He repented his distrust of their leaders. They were no traitors ; he saw that now. They thought and felt as he did ; were true and honourable, and knew what they did. That he could have been so blind ! Hurrah ! He would show that he was worthy to rank with the glorious leaders of a famous

nation. Praise to those who ventured to send an army into a strange land whose inhabitants were not prepared to defend themselves ! These miserable wretches—did they not know that the strong do what they will ?

‘ Hurrah for anar . . . ! ’ Nonsense ! This pitiful anarchy batted on wild words in secret places, and never went farther than an outrage on single individuals. A fraud ! Here was something different, something great, sublime ! To seize a whole nation by the throat and conquer, kill, wipe them out. . . .

‘ Long live war ! Hurrah ! ’ This newly fired patriotism, which, until now, he had looked on as an obstacle to anyone who wished to think fairly and justly, gave him unsuspected strength. He flew over the ground, his rifle outstretched, his hand on the trigger.

In a disordered heap the prisoners stumbled along the road. Their guards were tired of ill-treating them ; they wished to be free of this living burden. Alfonso pushed between the soldiers and fired at an Arab, who, wounded in the foot, lagged behind his companions in misfortune.

‘ *Evviva Italia !* ’ roared Alfonso as the shot rang out.

‘ *Evviva Italia !* ’ answered a score of voices. ‘ Hurrah ! long live the war ! ’

Shots sounded, blows were showered, bayonet-thrusts were freely distributed.

Trembling with joy, Alfonso loaded again. The insignificant printer felt himself grow. Stood he not with equal rights beside the originators of the war ? Was he not of equal birth ?

‘ Hurrah for the war ! Hurrah ! ’

Here Rapagnotti, of whom he had lost sight for some time, reappeared at his side.

‘ Don’t bother about them ! ’ he said eagerly. ‘ They have not a farthing ! Let us make for the town, where they are rich ! Come, comrade ! ’

Alfonso stared in his face in astonishment. This eternally hungry farmer was a very lamb.

‘ All right ! ’ he shouted. The solution of the war was : ‘ Your money or your life ! Hurrah ! ’

He followed in the same direction as the other, whose every step was guided by greed. Following a sudden impulse, he snatched off his cap and stuck it on the point of his bayonet. With his rifle high in the air, so that the plumes fluttered in the wind, he shouted from time to time :

‘ Long live war ! Hurrah ! Hurrah ! Hurrah ! ’

Rapagnotti tramped beside him. His lips moved, as he prayed. Strengthened by his prayer, he cried with a ringing voice :

‘ War for ever ! ’

II

HAMZA AND HANIFA

THROUGHOUT his life, Hamza, whom men called 'the Simple,' had had good fortune in all things. This was what he himself often asserted.

'Allah has shown himself gracious to his servant,' were his words. And then he would add: 'Blessed are the pure in heart!'

He was now sixty years of age, and lived with Hanifa—as old as himself—in a little clay-built hut before the western gate of the city. As he sat in his garden, he had on the one side a steep-ridged sand-hill, and on the other the rampart ditch—long since nearly filled up again. In the rainy season the ditch overflowed with water, and Hamza would often go up the sand-hill to look down upon this gift of Heaven. But, for ten months in the year, the broad furrow in the ground was dry; the sand trickled down its sides, and foot-passengers made their way across it. Beyond the ditch rose a wall of weathered stones. Hamza seldom set foot in the region behind this wall oftener than each Monday, when he took his dates to market. As soon as the last buyer had scraped together the

last remnant of his wares, he hoisted his basket on his shoulder and went home. He had accomplished the chief work of the week. After that, he would sit smoking at the door of his hut, and wait quietly for the next market-day.

On the slope, to the westward, stood his ten date-palms; below them was the hut. When Hamza glanced to the northward, he could catch sight of a streak of the glittering waters of the Mediterranean Sea. If his eyes followed the way to the southward, he thought, at times, he could see the hills looming blue in the distance.

More than forty years ago he had come thence with a party of other Berbers. He was then a thick-set, broad-shouldered young man, and looked with curious eyes on all the new things it was his lot to see. As he and his eight comrades, who had all set out to seek their fortune, caught sight from afar of the western gate of Tripoli, Hamza halted, and pointed to the sand-hill on which his house now stood.

‘On that spot I shall grow old,’ he said.

The other eight laughed aloud; and Ibn Saud, whom the tribesmen called ‘the Black,’ because his eyes were black as coal, and he had a growth of beard seldom seen on a man of his years, said :

‘But I see no house.’

‘That I shall build with my own hands on the slope of the farthest hill. Before it I shall plant ten date-palms: one for myself, and one for each of you—for you have come with me as true friends—and the tenth for my wife.’

The other eight laughed again; and Taleb, who loved a jest, cried out :

‘Hamza is already dreaming of a sweetheart ! Who will sing the wedding-song for thee ?’

‘I am not dreaming,’ said Hamza, seriously ; ‘I know I shall meet her here in the city. She will be the mother of my children, and we shall both grow old together in the little hut that I shall build with these hands of mine when the time comes.’

His seriousness stayed the jest on the lips of his hearers, and they went onward in silence. They were used to Hamza’s way, and they had no reproach to make to him ; for from childhood he had always been pious and a believer in God, the Merciful and Compassionate.

The nine young men parted in the city. Ibn Saud and Taleb soon took to the sea. They worked on board a felucca that sailed along the coast. The sea fascinated their minds, and, after they had for a while picked their way along its coasts, on board the felucca, they sailed away one day on a great merchant ship, whose masts soon vanished to the eastward beyond the reach of sight. Hamza never saw them again, though they ever remained in his memory.

Three of Hamza’s friends became soldiers. It well befits a man to bear arms and set his life on the wager of battle. One of them was wounded in an insurrection, and died immediately after. The second rose to the rank of non-commissioned officer, and, finally, went off to Syria ; his former comrades did not know whether he was still alive or not. The third deserted from his regiment. Some camel-drivers brought Hamza now and then a greeting from him. All the same, they would not say where he was living.

‘May Allah direct his steps upon the right way,’ said Hamza each time.

Two of his friends soon went back to their villages, on the high plateau of the interior. The air on the coast was not dry enough for their lungs. A great longing drew them away to the greyish yellow expanses, where the sun burned upon their brows and for weeks at a time the heat compelled them to absolute inactivity. He who had stayed behind had long watched them as they went away, and waved his adieu to them. They, too, sent their greetings often to Hamza. He sent his in return, rejoicing that his friends were doing well. Then, when for some years he heard no more of them, he knew that they had died, and he went to the tomb of a holy man, and, turning to the east, prayed long for those who had already gone before him, but whom he would some day see again.

The ninth of the comrades, Ali Schekr, was hardly ten years old when the party arrived at the city. For a long time he followed Hamza like a faithful dog. By the time that he was thirty he joined the police. He and Hamza met nearly every week, and talked of their friends, though there was more of this talk at first than there was now.

Hamza himself, after his arrival at Tripoli, rambled about by the harbour for some days and looked upon the sea. Every time that he thought of its wayward restlessness, there came over him a strange longing. But much as it charmed and fascinated him, he had never yet gone beyond the outer breakwater.

‘The feet of men are made for the solid earth,’ he said. ‘Let those who cannot resist their longings

plough the sea. I shall not do so. I shall seek the blessing of Allah by digging in the earth.'

Nevertheless, Hamza was at first a boatman in the harbour. From a man who owned several boats he hired one, agreeing to pay him half his earnings. When a ship lay to, off the harbour, Hamza with Ali Schekr rowed out to her to bring in passengers and their belongings. He had soon thoroughly learned the handling of the heavy boat, and young Ali was a good helper to him. Hamza not seldom came back with plenty of copper coins. He divided them honourably with the owner of the boat.

'God sees all,' he would say, 'and I have kept my promise.'

But the owner of the boat was an avaricious and, therefore, a quarrelsome fellow. He sat all day long by the shore, followed his boats with his eyes, and called the boatmen to him as soon as they touched the land. When they came, he would at once ask them for some money, and, when he got it, seldom gave them any thanks. He was always wrangling with his boatmen, and they, whether they were Arabs, Turks, Berbers, or Nubians, wrangled with him. No one hired a boat for longer than a month from this owner—no one, except Hamza.

Without any feeling of irritation he allowed the boat-owner to take more than belonged to him by right.

'He loses more by it than I do,' Hamza would answer when the other boatmen blamed him for being so easy-going. 'We live not for the present, but for the future life.'

No one ventured to deny that Hamza was right ;

but the boatmen liked neither the sentiments nor the business methods of their colleague.

Hamza only smiled at them. For many years he remained a boatman. At last he got tired of the business and managed to get himself a place in the customs service.

He was already known in the port and the market place as an upright, but rather simple-minded, man. At first he was welcome to his new comrades; but they soon wished to be rid of him. When they suggested to him that he might get something for himself out of the belongings of the travellers, he seemed not to understand them; and if some one pressed a coin into his hand, Hamza would often give it back to him before everybody's eyes. So, henceforth, Hamza did his work day by day among the custom-house officers without allowing his hands to be guilty of any base action or his thoughts to sin against God.

'You are a pious man, Hamza!' said the overseer one day to him; 'but you are too simple. You are not the man for us.'

'In the name of God, the Good and the Just!' replied Hamza, and bowed and went away.

After this he became a porter in the city, and did well in the business; for his reputation as an upright man had become a settled thing and made people eager to employ him. While other porters squatted idly by the walls of the houses, Hamza had enough to do. Then they chose him for their head man.

For twelve long years Hamza held this position. And though the porters were cunning enough to impose on him worse terms than those of his predecessor in the office, yet a just Providence so disposed it that they,

as well as Hamza, took more money when the week's earnings were shared out each Thursday. Most of them soon saw that Hamza's predecessor had been regularly swindling them, and they heartily congratulated themselves on their choice; but some were discontented—that, however, is a thing one can never avoid.

After Hamza had many times had to listen to their complaints, he one day called all the porters together and bade them a friendly farewell.

Most of them asked him to remain with them and let everything go on as before. But Hamza would not consent.

'It is not on account of the discontent and the complaints,' he said—'who am I, that I, forsooth, should go unblamed through the world?—but it is for my own sake. Man is made to dig the earth, and support himself with the fruits of the trees and the produce of the fields: not to bear burdens like a camel.' And with this he took a friendly leave of them, being most courteous to those who had been complaining. 'You are losing more than I do,' he said to them before he went away.

At his lodging Hamza pulled out the bag which contained the money that made up his savings. With this in his hand he betook himself to the bazaar.

While Hamza was the head man of the porters he had seen Hanifa, who was in service in the house of an artisan in the street of the silversmiths. Hanifa had also been born on the high plateau in the interior of the country, and came of the same tribe as Hamza. Hamza went straight to her from the meeting of the porters.

‘I have seen thee many times, Hanifa,’ he said, ‘when I came and went bringing goods for thy master. Wilt thou consent to my seeing the silversmith and having a talk with him?’

Hanifa, who, according to the custom of her tribe, wore no veil upon her face, stared in surprise at the man, in whom she recognised the porter.

‘Thy eyes are bright with wonder. Thou dost not yet understand of what I am speaking,’ said Hamza. ‘This shows that the One who is All-merciful has guided my steps upon the right path.’

He went into the shop, showed the silversmith his bag of money, and asked for Hanifa as his wife.

‘May it be done to thee according to thy wish,’ replied the silversmith. ‘Her mother is a relation of my own, and lives with me in the house; her father is dead. And, as I have indeed more servants than I need, all I ask for is a handful of money out of thy bag.’

‘Lay hold!’ said Hamza encouragingly, ‘and may the Almighty guide thy hand so that thou mayest find a silver piastre or so. There are a good many of them lying hidden in my heap of copper parās.’

The silversmith put his hand into the bag and filled it with money. But when he looked at it he did not find any piastres.

‘That’s settled,’ he said quietly, as he laid down the copper coins beside him. ‘This evening I shall speak to Hanifa’s mother.’

Hamza thanked him for his promise, and went out. He found Hanifa still standing in the courtyard.

‘I am going now to buy a bit of ground, where we shall build our home,’ said Hamza to her.

Then, at last, she understood, and blushed over all her face.

‘ It is good for the husband when the wife is not too quick of thought,’ said Hamza as he went away. ‘ Praise to the One, the Almighty ! ’

On that same day Hamza bought the sand-hill—for the possession of which he had worked for all these fifteen years—and in a few weeks he had a clay-built hut ready for himself and his wife to live in. Without further delay they took possession of their new home.

They lived happily together, but they had no children. Every Friday Hamza prayed for this favour of Heaven, in the great mosque, the Djama el Basha ; but his prayer was never heard. He and his wife long mourned because of this ; but when the ten date-palms, that Hamza had planted by his clay-built hut, grew up, and not only gave shade but also bore fruit, he called them his sons and daughters.

‘ It is the will of Allah that I should care for them and watch over them as if they were my own children ; perhaps this is why he has denied me any others,’ Hamza often declared ; and he would add : ‘ Has not the Prophet said, “ The noble date-palm belongs to the race of men. Honour it like the sister of thy own father ” ? ’

To every word her husband said, his wife would silently bow her assent. For so wonderfully had God guided Hamza’s ways, that his wife had not a loose tongue like other women, but, on the contrary, was always inclined to silence. When she was asked about anything, she had to think of the answer for a long time. So she passed for being even more simple than her husband.

As the palms grew up, old age came upon Hamza. He took it like all else as a good gift. Had not the Prophet said that an old man best prepares himself for Paradise? And Hanifa grew old at his side.

'We have found happiness,' Hamza often declared, and Hanifa bowed her assent.

The older he grew, the oftener Hamza would repeat these words. Each evening he knelt with his face turned to the east, and praised and thanked with all his heart the One, the Almighty.

His neighbours of the village—in which Hamza's clay hut stood farthest out towards the road—were full of admiration for him. If he had not been so silent, and almost shy of them, they would have regarded him as a holy man—perhaps, even, as a marabout. But he never cried out his prayers in a loud voice, never appeared in rent garments; and, when he made his devotions, he avoided the public places. He was even as simple as he was pious.

So Hamza lived blamelessly for many years in his garden behind the cactus-hedge, which protected it from the coming of thieves and the drift of the desert sand. He tilled his vegetable garden and cared for the date-palms and fig-trees that supplied to himself and Hanifa the necessities of life.

That for which he had striven he had obtained, and he cherished no further ambition.

The one friend who used to visit the husband and wife in their village—a little more than half a mile from the city—was the policeman, Ali Schekr. He told them whatever news there came of what was happening in the outside world, and they listened with interest to him. When he had eaten a few dates and a handful

of figs and smoked his cigarettes he rose, wished them good-bye, and went away again.

‘A strange story this!’ exclaimed Hamza one evening when Ali Schekr had departed on his homeward way. ‘These poor infidels that pray to painted images of stone and wood want to wage war against the Padishah! Do you understand, wife?’

Hanifa only shook her head. She did not waste a thought on a matter that was not clear to her husband.

‘Mere bazaar gossip!’ said Hamza to comfort himself, and then gave no further thought to what he had heard. ‘To-morrow we will bend the palm in the left-hand corner nearer to the one that grows highest on the slope. Have you noticed, Hanifa, that it is turning away from the two male palms that grow nearest to it? But it is stretching out its leaves longingly to that strong tree over there. It is pining with love for that which it is the most difficult to reach. So it is my business to bring together these two that such a relentless space keeps apart. Get the long fibre rope ready, wife.’ And, like a father speaking to his children, Hamza whispered affectionately to the two palms: ‘To-morrow! . . . to-morrow! . . .’ Then he went into the hut, saying: ‘One must be merciful to the helpless! Is it not written: “Destroy no date-palm. It rewards thee richly for every good action of thine”?’

Next morning Hamza was at work in his garden; and, as he had promised the evening before, he bound the two outermost trees securely together with Hanifa’s fibre rope, and bent down their crests one on the other. Then on many an evening he sat and regarded his work.

As the pollen of the male tree fell on the crest of the tree below it, he smiled, stroked his beard, and said :

‘ Shall not a good father take care of his children ? ’

Hanifa sat beside her husband and smiled with him ; but, according to her custom, said nothing.

Hamza went on with his talk : ‘ Thou art a good wife. Right well art thou worth the handful of copper money that thy mother’s cousin took from my purse—and it was soon filled up again.’

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The summer went by amid various occupations. Rumours of an Italian attack on Tripoli were continually in circulation, and the neighbours shouted them to Hamza across his cactus-hedge. But he would wave them aside with his hand, smile, and say only :

‘ They are poorer than we are. Besides, there are only a few of them.’

‘ Their land lies on the other side of the sea ; and, over there, there are numberless *Italianos*,’ answered his neighbour.

‘ Why should they attack us ? ’ asked Hamza, getting somewhat contentious.

‘ They are stronger than we are, do you see—stronger and more numerous.’

‘ That is no reason,’ explained Hamza. ‘ The law does not allow a stronger man to strike a weaker.’ And, persuaded of the truth of his assertion, he added : ‘ God shows not the way to the unjust man.’

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One day in the spring, Ali Schekr arrived in greater

haste than ever before. He forgot all about the basket of dates, and did not even see the figs.

'*Italianos!*' he gasped out. 'The garrison is marching out of the city. The soldiers are not to halt even at Ain Zara!'

'And thou?' asked Hamza in surprise.

'I am to remain. Just now there is good need of men to take care of the foreigner-residents. What would happen if we, too, went away?'

But there was no cheerfulness in Ali Schekr's speech, and he took a gloomy view of things.

He soon went back to the city, after having bade Hamza a friendly farewell.

'Dost thou understand this?' asked Hamza, when Ali Schekr was gone.

But his wife only shook her head. In the night there was a loud knocking at the door of the clay-built hut. Hamza opened it, and, despite the darkness, could see a Turkish non-commissioned officer. Behind him some soldiers were in sight; and, farther off, a large body of troops.

'Are there no longer any Moslems?' asked the sergeant excitedly.

'Thou speakest foolishly! Are we not all children of one Father?'

'Here, take this!' and he handed a rifle to Hamza, and called out to the people behind him: 'Cartridges!'

A soldier put a square parcel into Hamza's outstretched hand.

'Are there no longer any Moslems?' cried out the sergeant again, striking his breast with his clenched fist. 'Are there no longer any Moslems left?'

'In the name of God!' said Hamza, and handed

the parcel of cartridges to Hanifa who had appeared at the door.

‘When the signal sounds!’ whispered the sergeant with quivering lips, ‘thou hast a rifle, thou hast cartridges: remember, then, that thou art a Moslem!’

‘Thou needst not remind me of that,’ answered Hamza in a friendly tone.

‘Farewell, True Believer!’

The sergeant hurried off quickly along the road, followed by his soldiers. They were going southwards, towards the desert. Hamza shook his head as he noticed this. And, in the darkness, rang out the cry of the sergeant, full of grief and scorn:

‘Are there no longer any Moslems left?’

He called it out again and again. His grief over this retreat in the presence of the enemy gave enduring strength to his voice, and it was a long time before the cry at last died away in the distance.

Hamza stared out into the night. The cry made his figure—bent with age—erect again for a while; drove the blood more swiftly through his veins, and awoke new thoughts. But, then, he felt how his aged toil-worn hands were trembling.

‘No, no!’ he murmured in a low voice.

Like an echo Hanifa repeated the words behind him.

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At last the morning came, and Hamza went out into his garden. He had hardly taken three steps when he heard some one calling his name.

On the other side of the cactus-hedge stood Ibrahim, the head man of the village, an Arab of some forty years, with a long black beard.

‘Come closer!’ said Ibrahim, beckoning, and as Hamza complied, he whispered eagerly to him:

‘Did you, too, get a rifle last night? Take good care of it! Keep quiet! I shall give the signal!’

He went away quickly, and Hamza thought he saw a revolver sticking out of his girdle.

All day long Hamza sat in his garden and stared sadly at the ground before him. What did all this mean? What was going to happen? His tongue shaped many questions; but he found no answer for them.

As on this, so on many other days, he sat on the same spot, and each evening he said with an anxious shake of his head:

‘I can make nothing of it!’

One day he saw some Italian soldiers on the road. They came marching in quick step towards the desert, and halted by the last of the garden walls. Plumes of green feathers fluttered on their pith helmets, and the sun glittered on their bayonets and sword-sheaths. They were good fellows, and many of them nodded to the Arabs, who, curious to see them, put their heads out of the house doors.

All day long other soldiers came and went. The first party had camped near the village. Some of them lighted fires, others pitched tents, but most of them were busy digging a long trench in the sand, or repairing the garden walls that in some places were in ruin.

Hamza, sheltered behind his cactus-hedge, watched their proceedings. He thought it was friendly of them to build up again the tumble-down garden walls. And it was all the better, because just here the oasis formed

only a narrow stretch of fruitful land between the desert and the city.

‘God is Great!’ said Hamza piously. ‘The *Italianos* are doing in one day what we have not accomplished in many years.’

In the evening, Moedebb, the twelve-year-old son of the village head man, came to him.

‘To-morrow afternoon all the men of the village are to assemble outside my father’s house.’

‘To-morrow is the holy day,’¹ objected Hamza.

‘The *Italianos* have ordered it, not my father.’

‘Shall I bring the rifle with me?’

The boy cast a look of contempt on Hamza, and laid a finger on his lips.

‘Come with empty hands and be silent,’ he said, and strode away with the dignified bearing of a man.

When, on the Friday, Hamza arrived at the appointed place, he found all the men of the village already assembled there. The elders sat with their backs leaning against the wall of the head man’s house. The young men kept together at the south side of the open space. On each of the other sides of the square a company of Italian soldiers was drawn up, with ordered arms. The officers stood in a group in front of them. They, as well as the soldiers, were in good humour, and looked with a mixture of contemptuous amusement and curiosity at the elders in the shadow of the wall and the young men who stood out in the sunlight, silent and serious. Hamza had taken his place in the row of the elder men. Nothing was happening.

¹ Friday, the Mohammedan Sabbath.

After a while there was a thunder of horse-hoofs, and a party of mounted officers galloped on to the market-place. A word of command rang out. The ranks of soldiers came stiffly to attention and the rifles flew up from the ground. Then came some ceremonies that were unintelligible to the Arab spectators. At last the colonel raised his voice and addressed a speech to the Arabs, who kept perfectly motionless all the time.

An interpreter—many of the villagers knew him, for he was a slipper-maker who had a shop in one of the streets of the city—came forward, as soon as the colonel had got to the end of his first paragraph, and began to translate the speech.

‘The all powerful Lord and King of Italy,’ he interpreted—then he added on his own account, ‘God give him long life and grant success to his undertakings’—‘proclaims, hereby, Tripoli to be an Italian province and its inhabitants to be his subjects, pledged to fidelity to their new ruler.’

The old men by the wall bent their brows lower towards the ground, and the young fellows looked to their front with downcast eyes, till the boy Moedebb slipped unexpectedly in among them, and whispered some words of scorn. Then they clenched their fists under the folds of their *burnous*, and their eyes began to sparkle.

All the time the colonel went on talking, and the slipper-maker from the bazaar translated his words.

In the name of the new Government he promised a kindly and gracious rule and much prosperity to come. The inhabitants were, therefore, on their part, to show goodwill to the troops, not hinder them in

their work, and, above all things, always tell them any news they might pick up as to the proceedings of the Turks.

These blinded people, he said, instead of surrendering at discretion, had taken refuge in the desert. They had no prospect of anything but misery and suffering ; but they had chosen their own way. The least insubordination would be severely punished. Did they understand him ?

No one answered, and the interpreter gave a great shrug of his shoulders. The colonel cast a searching look at the row of elders, glanced rapidly at the younger men, and then ordered the head man of the village to come forward. Then he made the interpreter say to him :

‘It is every citizen’s duty to sacrifice his life for his country and his faith. Contempt is the well-deserved penalty that falls upon him who refuses this duty. Say this to your people. If they have understood my words they will all know what they have to do.’

‘Thou speakest wisely and justly,’ answered the village head man, and raised his eyes to look straight into those of the colonel. ‘It is the duty of every True Believer to die for his faith and his country. Thou shalt have no reason to visit us with contempt.’

The slipper-maker from the bazaar shook his head. He did not like the tone in which the village head man had spoken. But the colonel and the officers around him were smiling cheerfully. They were used to the reserved bearing of the Arabs, and they did not understand their language. Besides, they were in a hurry. There were several other villages in the oasis,

and the inhabitants were to have the change in their allegiance brought to their knowledge as quickly as possible.

‘Then I consider your reply as an oath of fidelity. See to it that no one dares to break it. That will be severely punished.’

This said, the colonel saluted with his riding-whip, and once more his glance swept over the groups of silent men. Then he turned his horse down the road and galloped southwards. A little farther on he was met by an adjutant, who reported some suspicious movements in the desert. The colonel gave an angry shrug of his shoulders. He must, without delay, explain to those Arabs, over there, whose subjects exactly they now were. Then there was such an endless amount of work to be done in the regiment, and to-day, when he just happened to have an hour free, this other business must come in between. Surely the Arabs would not be so mad as to . . .

Far away to the southwards a shot rang out. The colonel drove the spurs into the sides of his horse and galloped on. If the Arabs inside the lines were thinking of anything else but complete submission, so much the worse for themselves! If they had any idea of treachery, he was not the man to wink at their proceedings.

The companies had ‘formed fours-right,’ and marched out of the market-place. The interpreter went with them, keeping step with the men. He had an idea that, out there in the desert, though ignorance and fanaticism were in command, it was, after all, a safer place. He took a sidelong glance at the row of elders, and measured the village head man from head to foot with a searching look. The Arab returned

the look with contempt. The slipper-maker, with a curious kind of smile on his face, was now asking himself if he ought not to communicate his suspicions to the officers. No ; on the whole, he had better not. For very likely they would think that he did not properly understand their language, and had not correctly translated the colonel's words. And then they would perhaps take something off the pay they had agreed to give him, or in the end, refuse it to him entirely. Oh, he knew these Unbelievers from across the sea ! One must be cunning and cautious in dealing with them. Once more he looked back, shrugged his shoulders, and marched on. A garden wall hid the row of silent old men from his view, and the motionless figure of the village head man was also out of sight. The slipper-maker shook his head, and looked at the officer at the head of the column. He was his friend ; but when no one asked him any question, why should he speak ?

There was the crack of a shot far off. A quiver ran through the ranks and the company commander gave the order ' Halt ! '

The slipper-maker turned out of the ranks, gave a humble bow, and hurried off towards the city.

When the two companies were no longer in sight, Ibrahim spat after the soldiers.

' You have all heard it. He who will not stake his life for his faith and country is worthy of nothing but contempt.'

The young men came eagerly forward from the side of the square. The elders stood up.

' Who are we, then, that the Unbelievers should so dare to revile us ? Rhalil, dost thou hear me aright ? These foreign dogs fight for their country and die

for their faith. Al Said, we are silent, and look upon the ground, while they scorn us for our cowardice. Hamza, are we, then, no longer men? Thou, Sidi ben Hassan, have we the hearts of women in our breasts and the hands of children on our arms? Are there no more Moslems left?'

A gust of wind brought the report of a shot to the ears of the men.

'God is Great,' said Ibrahim, raising his hands towards heaven. 'Hasten to your dwellings! When the shots fall thickly and the reports ring nearer, let us gather behind Rhalil's garden wall and on the sand-hill by Hamza's hut. Thence we can fire into the shelter-trenches of those unbelieving dogs.' He shook his clenched fist in the direction in which the colonel had ridden away. 'Thou hast said it, officer. We, too, can die for our faith!'

With eyes aflame, the men separated in various directions. Hamza went away with down-bent head and arms hanging listlessly at his sides. The ardour of the rest frightened him.

'I don't understand it,' he repeated many times. 'I don't understand it.'

Hanifa met him at the door.

'If you don't understand it, then don't think of it,' she said.

But Hamza only shook his head.

Some shots were fired, away to the southwards. This gave him something else to think of, and he listened in wonder to the sharp, abrupt reports.

The short twilight came, and in its train the night followed quickly and hid the village and the palm-groves in its dense veil. Far off, in the south, flickered

an unbroken line of sparks. They flashed into light and vanished in the same instant, blazed out anew and again disappeared. Were it not for the continual reports, one might have thought of some freakish game of unruly children.

Hamza, for his part, stared until his eyes smarted.

'God is Great !' he murmured continually, full of astonishment at the spectacle.

'I testify that there is but one God,' said a voice beside him, and Hamza recognised Ibrahim.

'Is it the time ?' asked the old man.

'Not yet.' The other laid his hand heavily on the old man's shoulder. 'Look over there ! Just now there was only one line of fire. Now there are two of them.'

Hamza strained his eyes to the uttermost and could make out yet another line of sparks that flashed out and were swallowed up in the darkness. For a considerable distance the two lines ran parallel to each other, and then suddenly broke off. But nearer the hill, on which the two spectators stood, the lines were wider apart. There the fight went on somewhat haltingly; and sometimes the firing ceased altogether for many minutes. Then, for a little while, the rows of sparks flamed out again ; friends and foes let themselves go in aimless strife, blazing away their cartridges into the darkness, until there was once more a brief silence. Close by the height everything was perfectly quiet. But away towards the wave-like hills that bounded the horizon to the southwards, the din was increasing. The struggle was growing from an outpost engagement into a regular attack. Cannon suddenly joined in, and a rocket lit up the scene over a wide stretch of ground.

‘God is Great!’ exclaimed Hamza.

‘I testify that there is but one God!’ repeated the village head man, and his voice quivered as if with fear.

The two men remained for an hour upon the hill. Then the fighting came suddenly to an end. A few scattered shots blazed out. A cannon thundered for the last time. Then there was silence, and the darkness, which the two men had forgotten, brooded once more, heavily and oppressively, over the landscape.

‘Sleep if thou canst, friend Hamza,’ advised the head man; ‘to-night thou wilt not find it so easy.’

‘When is it?’ asked Hamza in a hoarse whisper.

‘Perhaps to-morrow will give thee the answer. Farewell!’

But, then, three or four shots rang out on the other side of the cactus-hedge. Hamza, groping for something to catch on to, found Ibrahim’s hand seeking his own.

Then there was a sound of hurrying steps; voices yelled out in anger; then came another shot and a loud cry of pain, that died away in a gurgling moan.

‘That was Sidi ben Hassan,’ whispered Ibrahim, his voice now trembling with hate and the longing for revenge.

From the road below there came the confused outcry of a dozen voices. Most of them were soon silent, and, at last, all that one heard was the single voice of some one excitedly defending himself against some accusation. Then one word suddenly cut short the defence. It was a muttered word of command, and with that a party of soldiers marched away from the place. Ibrahim listened, and, as the tramp of

their footsteps died away in the distance, he slipped out to the road below.

‘Sidi ben Hassan, art thou here?’ he whispered. A feeble moaning was the reply.

Guided by this, Ibrahim groped his way to him.

‘God be praised! thou art alive!’

‘I came out of my house and was going along the road,’ Sidi ben Hassan explained in a low voice; ‘some one called out to me, but I did not answer. I really did not understand. Then he fired a shot, and at once several other guns went off.’

‘Art thou wounded?’

‘No; but they beat me down with rifle butts.’ Sidi ben Hassan had risen and leant upon Ibrahim. ‘Their voices shook with fear,’ he whispered with spiteful satisfaction; ‘they were quite pale.’

‘Praised be God!’ Ibrahim’s voice rang out triumphantly. ‘They have felt, even as we, the numbing terror of the night. They listened to the hopeless fight of their comrades against the Sons of the Prophet, and fear has distracted their minds. This is why they fired and struck out in a panic of their own. God has them in his hands!’

Hamza stood by the opening in the cactus-hedge and listened to the talk of the two others. His soul was full of wonder at the events of the night, but he felt no more fear.

‘I could not understand it,’ he murmured softly, as he heard Ibrahim going away with the man who had been struck down.

Next morning, just as the day was breaking, a cannon-shot woke him—a shot fired hardly a hundred paces from the hut. He was on his feet in a moment,

and hurried out. Hanifa cried out a question to him, but he called to her to keep quiet. A puzzling noise quite close to the house had aroused his curiosity. He had heard rightly. It was the noise of an axe at work. Two of his date-palms, already felled, lay on the ground, and some gunners were hard at it on two others, that trembled under their strokes.

‘It is written, “Destroy no date-palm,”’ Hamza cried out as he rushed towards the soldiers. He received a heavy blow that sent him staggering aside. The third palm fell, and Hamza hid his face in his hands. It was the very tree that last spring he had linked with the male palm on the slope above it.

A corporal, who was directing the work, called out some words impatiently to a man who stood a little way off looking on idly with a cigarette in his mouth. He was in civilian attire, but he had a soldier’s *képi* on his head.

The man thus addressed turned to Hamza : ‘Hi ! old man !’ he said, speaking with an indistinct pronunciation and in a kind of Arabic that the old man could hardly understand. ‘Get out of the way ! This is war, you see !—war . . . war !’ He clapped his hands together and nodded as if to confirm his statement. Then he spat out the stump of his cigarette and lighted another. And, turning to the soldiers, he went on in Italian : ‘Don’t worry about him. He’s silly. So they all are, and every one of them, in this country. Take my word for it, I’ve lived long enough here to know the Arabs. Well, now you have got a good grip of them.—Can’t we be getting on, corporal ?’

‘That will do,’ said the corporal, pointing to the

last palm that had been felled. 'We don't want the others. Leave them where they are.'

Six men hoisted on to their shoulders the palm trunk he had pointed out, and carried it down to the road. A soldier gathered up the axes and went after them. He laughed mockingly at Hamza, who had thrown himself on the ground in speechless despair. The corporal, who was in a bad humour, shook his fist at the old man.

'*Corpo di Bacco!*' exclaimed the man with the *képi*, giving Hamza a friendly push with his foot. 'I verily believe the fellow is crying . . . and all for a few old trees!' And then he went on in his unintelligible Arabic: 'We have war, now . . . war! Later on, all will come right.'

He looked after the soldiers, who had already reached the road.

'Hast thou money?' he whispered. 'Eh! old man! . . . piastre . . . para . . . money? Out with it!'

'They needed only one, and they have felled four!' sobbed Hamza.

'Four!—four of what? Art thou thinking of thy trees? What matter so much about a few palms! Well, they need not have felled four when they wanted only one! but, then, they had all the trouble of it. What are you droning about? *Per Bacco*, give me a few paras, or if not . . .' He stopped, pushed the *képi* back from his forehead, and looked angrily at an Arab who was coming across the garden. 'So thou wilt not! I'll remember it against thee, old fellow! We have war now, seest thou?—war!' He gave a shrill whistle, turned sharply away from his bargaining, and hurried after the soldiers.

‘Dog and son of a dog!’ spat Ibrahim after him.

All the while Hamza sat motionless with his head in his hands.

Ibrahim’s eyes wandered from the old man to the palms whose crests kissed the sand. He bit his teeth together, and walked along by the cactus-hedge as if he were looking for something. He smiled grimly as he marked its height and thickness. It would be no protection against bullets; but, for all that, it would be a serious obstacle to a rush.

‘To-day!’ he whispered to Hamza before going away.

‘My palms . . . I cannot . . .’ stammered the old man. When he looked up, Ibrahim had gone.

After the cannon-shot that had roused Hamza from his sleep, there was quiet for a while. Suddenly the artillery began to thunder again. The guns stood half sunk in sand on the other side of the road, half-way to the market-place. Hamza shook his head, and stood up. There was a sort of cloud before his eyes. He dragged himself with tottering steps to his hut. Misfortune had come, swift and crushing: his palm-trees—his children—must die.

Outside the noise of battle rose higher. The fight began with some shots from an outpost that withdrew quickly through the sand. And then at once the rifle-firing broke out along the whole line.

From his house Hamza could hear the increasing din of conflict. The cannon were fired at regular intervals; but there was an unceasing rattle of musketry. After the firing had lasted for some time his ears had become used to it. His terror at the roaring storm grew less, and instead of it came curiosity. It took violent

possession of him. He must see what was happening outside. He made a movement to rise, but Hanifa, who was cowering beside him, drew him back again.

‘It is all in God’s hands,’ said Hamza devoutly. As he met the questioning look in his wife’s eyes, he saw that she had not heard his words, and he repeated them, raising his voice.

Again he listened to the sounds outside. Now he heard a double rattle of musketry—near at hand, a fierce uninterrupted fire; and, farther off, an angry challenge. Hamza nodded his head. The True Believers were over there, attacking the foreigners, and . . .

‘Come!’ cried a voice, and the doorway was for a moment darkened.

Hamza tried to rise, but Hanifa caught him by the arm and stopped him. He sank on the ground again. His heart beat fast, and his breath came short and quick. He felt a strange impulse to cry out and strike his breast.

‘The rifle!’ he gasped, and crept towards the grass mat under which it was hidden.

Hanifa was at his side in a moment, and took it from him.

‘Am I not a man?’ asked Hamza, in a tone intended to show how angry he was at her assertion of authority.

‘Old man,’ answered Hanifa, and went on to say something he could not understand, when, suddenly, a dozen shots crashed out close to the hut.

Hamza listened breathlessly. The noise of the fight—which so far, notwithstanding the cannon-shots and the rifle volleys, had seemed something monotonous, exciting and depressing at the same time—now all

at once became a call, a command. Something all important, something in which he must bear a part, was going on upon the other side of the clay wall.

'My palms!' he cried, and snatched the rifle. He knew it now—he must avenge the death of the date-trees.

But Hanifa was quicker than her husband. With one hand she held him back as he struggled to go out; with the other she tore her hair.

'Old man! . . . old man!' came quickly from her lips.

The shots near the hut rang out in quicker succession; but at the same time the roar of the outer circle of fire rose still higher. The cannon thundered unceasingly, and, like a setting for the whole, the rattle of rifle-fire crackled in a din that ever rose louder and spread wider. Hamza felt the blood boiling through his veins, and his limbs filled with the strength of youth. He had never been as strong as now. He rose up calmly, pushed his wife aside, and went to the door. But, then, it occurred to him that the rifle was no good without the cartridges, and he called out to Hanifa to bring them to him. She gave a quiet satisfied smile—it was better to know what one meant to do.

Then something new and unexpected happened.

A cry of pain, rage, vengeance, and hate burst out on all sides. There were hundreds of yelling voices, hundreds of hearts, that in this cry sought to give vent to their feelings. Like a wave of terror it all at once swept over the hut. There was a rush of trampling feet, and some shots fell around.

Rifle in hand, Hamza came forth from his dwelling.

'My date-trees!' he said, through his set teeth.

The first man he saw was his neighbour, Rhalil. He was lying full length on the ground, without stirring. Hamza raised his eyes from the corpse, and stared with open mouth. There was Sidi ben Hassan tumbling down in a heap. Another—an older man—fell beside him. Was it not El Bidi whom they called 'the Miser'? He crawled on hands and knees, stood up, fell down again, and crawled on with a look of indescribable anguish lighting up his eyes. And there lay Abu Afr who was married only a month ago. What would his young wife say to that?

Hamza could not think out his thoughts to the end. A whole series of various events were happening in swift succession. A bullet whistled by his cheek and buried itself with a dull thud in the wall behind him. Plumes of feathers were fluttering on the other side of the cactus-hedge, and the white sun-helmets of the Italians ducked down behind its pulpy leaves. Shots went off. There was a mingled din of hurrahs and curses. A man came running by that Hamza thought he recognised, without, all the same, being able to remember who he was. The other shouted something, pointed with his brown fist towards the market-place, and then was gone again. Old El Bibi fell for the fourth or fifth time, gave a loud moan, and then lay still.

Panting and wild with rage the Italians rushed the garden from two sides. Through the gate on the road a body of *bersaglieri* pushed in, and grey-clad linesmen dashed up from the desert side. All were beside themselves. Their eyes were aflame, their lips

were twitching, and their tongues uttered menacing outcries that came in broken accents from their parched throats. Hither and thither they rushed. The garden was for a while the arena of a mad confused *melée*.

A soldier ran his bayonet into the dead body of Abu Afr, and cried out ceaselessly :

‘ Treachery ! treachery ! ’

Another fired after the man who had just rushed past Hamza. Another assailed with curses and blows of his rifle-butt the stem of a palm ; his eyes stared wildly without seeing, and his mouth howled out unintelligible words. Everywhere insane, unaccountable things were being done.

But, gradually, some appearance of order began to show itself amid the tumult. Some reasoning mind was uniting the over-excited brains in a common purpose. The soldier, who kept on mishandling the dead Abu Afr, and shouting ‘ Treachery ! ’ had hit upon the required word.

‘ Treachery ! ’ they bellowed, foaming with rage. ‘ Treachery ! ’ howled they all, without exception.

Two soldiers came from a corner, bringing the wounded village head man between them. He was pushed against the clay wall of the hut, some shots rang out, and he fell in a heap.

‘ Treachery ! treachery ! ’ cried those that shot him, and there was the ringing tone of self-satisfied triumph in their voices. They had not merely done a necessary work, but taken part in a just act of punishment. They rose in their own esteem.

All the while Hamza was standing still on the same spot. He had received no hurt in the mad *melée*, and

he was now staring in surprise at the dead man lying pierced with bullets by the clay-built hut. Yes, it was Ibrahim, who had rushed past him, and whom in his confused mind he had failed to recognise. Then he bowed his head and listened. The rifle-fire over yonder in the desert had ceased ; no more shots came from the Italian lines. The battle had ended. The attack on the rear had come too soon and had therefore miscarried. Of this, however, Hamza understood nothing. He felt only that the yelling voices, the wild gesticulations, the faces distorted with hate round about him, made up as a whole something far more terrible than the mighty thunder of the cannon and the ceaseless rattle of the rifle-fire could mean.

‘ Here is yet another of the dogs ! ’ was shouted near him.

‘ He fired at us from his pig-stye of a house,’ cried another.

‘ Hang the fellow ! ’

‘ Give me a cartridge ! Mine are all gone ! ’

Half a dozen soldiers gathered about Hamza. Two fists fell heavily on his shoulders, one sending him staggering to the left, the other to the right. From all sides men, afire with rage, came running.

A young officer forced his way through them. His eyes glowed in his pale white face. Instead of the mortal terror that his looks had expressed just before, there now blazed in them an insatiable thirst for vengeance.

‘ Order, comrades ! Before all things, order ! ’ he shouted. ‘ We must, anyhow, not get ourselves blamed for a . . . for a . . . ’ his teeth mumbled the word again, without his being able to find the next. Then he

broke into an hysteric laugh that distorted his well-formed features. 'Has anyone seen the old fellow firing a shot?' he asked, when, with a violent effort, he had controlled this spasmodic attack.

'Here is a Turkish rifle lying by his feet.' The soldier as he gave the answer kicked the weapon aside excitedly.

'Then the case is clear. He must . . . must . . . ' Again the young man was mumbling the words in his teeth, until the attack broke out again in a paroxysm of laughter. Helpless with rage, the officer pointed to the wall.

'God is Great!' murmured Hamza, and looked back at the door of the hut, into which just then some soldiers were forcing their way.

From the garden of his neighbour, Rhalil, there came the repeated piercing shrieks of a woman. Some shots rang out, and the shrieks died away in a feeble lamentation.

Shots were going off all around. But it was no ordinary shooting. There was something in it of uncontrolled passion, that made one think of exasperated panic. One felt it in the way in which one shot would send off a lot more after it: in the sudden inexplicable silences, that came from time to time, only to give place at once to a still more awful outburst of sound.

Some cannon rumbled along the road that, as it passed the village, was a hard stone-paved highway. Then came a stretch of loose sand. The deafening clatter of the wheels ceased suddenly and was smothered into a sharp crunching sound, punctuated with the cries of the artillery-drivers urging their horses on,

and now and then the whistling crack of a whip. Far off beyond some shots again gave a menacing challenge, and others answered them from the gardens of the village. Horse-hoofs thundered on the road, and, through the opening in the cactus-hedge, Hamza saw a group of officers gallop past.

Hamza was hustled up against the wall of his house. A soldier struck him on the head with his fist ; another spat in his face.

‘ Traitor ! Dog ! ’

Old Hamza fell backwards on the threshold, and rolled over, but was again set upon his feet.

‘ Look here ! she has a lot of cartridges hidden in her clothes ! It ’s abominable ! ’

And Hanifa was violently pushed out beside her husband. She fell at his side, huddled in a heap, and closed her eyes. She still held in her hand a package of cartridges.

‘ Get back ! ’ cried the officer with the hysteric fits of laughter. ‘ Don’t forget yourselves ! Justice and order, comrades ! Traitors must be punished, but the innocent . . . Ha, ha, ha ! Damn it ! . . . Out of the way, there ! Second section !—attention ! Ha, ha, ha ! ’

Bersaglieri and linesmen pushed up to each other and put themselves into a crooked irregular line. But angry feeling got the upper hand, and they could no longer keep any disciplined order. A man fired without aiming, and the bullet bored itself into the wall. Other shots rang out, one by one, and then came the crack of the volley before a command could be heard.

Hamza had bent down to arrange the robe of Hanifa as she lay huddled on the ground. As the soldiers

dragged her out of the hut, her robe had unfastened on her shoulder, and the brown skin of the old woman showed through the gap. It hurt his feelings to think that the glance of these foreign Unbelievers should fall upon the body of an Arab woman. As he did it, he smiled at the soldiers with a mixture of pity and contempt. They meant to send him the same way as Ibrahim—well, he was ready. But why old Hanifa also? . . . This surprised and saddened him. The cartridges in her hands . . . why, she had only obeyed her husband, as every good wife does and should do.

As he saw the rifles levelled at him, some of them carrying bayonets on their barrels, and swaying like reeds in the wind, he dropped his arms by his sides, as the rule of the Malachite sect ordains, raised his eyes to heaven, and cried aloud :

‘ God is Great ! ’

The rifles spat fire and bullets. There was a clatter on the clay wall. Old Hanifa shrieked aloud ; then was at once still and lay without a movement. Hamza had closed his eyes as if dazzled, but he at once opened them again. His breast seemed on fire. They had poured half-molten lead into him. His legs would not support him any longer. Then came night, cool and compassionate, after an agonising day. For the last time Hamza opened his eyes. He saw the palms—his children ; the torn hedge, and . . . and . . . ah ! too, he saw Hanifa, who had for so many years stood faithfully by his side. She had always been a good wife to him . . . yes, good. . . . He moved his head, and laid it on her shoulder. She had already gone to rest, and was sleeping so soundly . . . Yes, indeed, it was night now . . . the night.

A loud laugh close by gave Hamza's thoughts another direction. Amongst the soldiers stood a man in civilian dress with a *képi* cocked over one ear. He had slipped his first finger through the trigger-guard of a revolver, which he swung from side to side.

'Where have I seen him before?' thought Hamza. But he felt too weary to seek for an answer; besides, it was now time to sleep. His eyelids dropped, a quiver ran through his body, and Hamza forgot all pain and anxiety in the stillness and rest that finally were come to him. With a last grateful sigh he whispered:

'God is Great!'

Across his body, the hysterical officer called out a question to the interpreter, who had returned again at so apt a time:

'What does he say?' the other repeated the question. 'Some nonsense, naturally.' Then he translated, with an idiotic laugh, 'God is great! Ha, ha, ha!'

III

THE VICTOR'S MEED

LIEUTENANT NINO RIVARATO turned from the Corso into one of the small side streets. The big plume of cock's feathers in his *bersagliere* hat fluttered in disorder in the brisk breeze. But though Lieutenant Nino at other times paid a very precise attention to his appearance, to-day he gave no thought to it. But, then, there was no need to trouble about it. His uniform fitted closely without the slightest crease upon his well-built figure, his sword-sheath beat in measured time against his left leg, and his short but quick steps showed a light-hearted, dashing haste that well befitted a *bersagliere*.

As soon as he turned the corner, Lieutenant Nino directed his glance to a balcony a little farther down the street. There was no one to be seen there, and a light touch of red coloured the cheeks of the lieutenant as he became aware of this. In the next second the blush gave way to a well-contented look. It was quite natural that a young lady with the distinguished education that the Signorina Carmela had enjoyed should not be running out on a balcony like an

empty-headed schoolgirl, even though she knew that her faithful admirer would to-day be paying his respects to the Tallandini family.

With a haste that became greater the nearer he was to his object, Lieutenant Nino swung up to the door of the house, took the steps in a couple of long bounds, and rushed breathlessly into the dwelling.

‘ War is declared ! ’

Signor Tallandini threw down his napkin and rose from the breakfast-table ; the Signora uttered a sharp ‘ *Dio mio* ’ ; and Signorina Carmela kept looking down into her coffee-cup, after first casting a kindly glance at the lieutenant—the glance he had expected in his confidence of victory.

When the excitement over the unexpected announcement had somewhat subsided, Lieutenant Nino shook hands with the father and mother and came close to Signorina Carmela. An endless sadness came over the young lieutenant, and his eyes were moist, against his will. Was it not for his sake that the charming Carmela could hardly conceal her anxious emotion—so, she loved him ? He bent down and reverently kissed the little warm hand that he felt trembling in his own.

Behind the backs of the young people Signor Tallandini nodded to his wife. With another ‘ *Dio mio* ’ that had a sound of inexpressible helplessness, she went up to her husband. Signor Tallandini had already opened the door of the inner room, and he signed to his wife to go in there. She raised up her hands in perplexity, whispered once more her inevitable ‘ *Dio mio*, ’ and glided out.

The signor followed her as noiselessly as his stout-

ness would permit, and, after a kindly look behind him that was full of meaning, shut the door. The lovers were alone.

Lieutenant Nino knew exactly what he wanted to say to his adored Carmela—he had so often rehearsed it to himself. But just now the words would not come to his tongue. He stammered out something that was unintelligible and absurd, and blushed at his own clumsiness. Then Signorina Carmela came to his aid.

‘Is it war?’ she asked with a gasp.

Lieutenant Nino was once more master of the situation.

‘Those wretched Turks!’ he said, straightening himself up. ‘The whole thing is a mere excursion of no real importance. It is thought that we shall have to fire hardly ten shots.’

Signorina Carmela sighed. With such great confidence it was becoming an easier matter for her. The colour came back to her cheeks and her lips smiled.

Then Lieutenant Nino bent down and kissed once more the hand that still lay in his own.

‘My Carmela!’ he whispered.

She looked beyond him and said, as if speaking to vacancy:

‘If only the war had not come!’

‘In that case, I should probably not have taken courage to say it to you for a long time.’

At that very moment it occurred to him that, so far, nothing essential had been said. He blinked his eyelids thoughtfully, and asked himself what was the most becoming way to begin. And once more

Signorina Carmela freed him from all embarrassment. She stretched out her other hand to him, and he hastened to grasp it.

For a few seconds the two young people looked into each other's eyes, in trembling suspense. What they had so long hoped for, and vaguely anticipated, was now reality. Signorina Carmela, overcome by her feelings, gave a little stagger, and Lieutenant Nino slipped his arm round her waist. Their lips were irresistibly drawn together and met in a kiss. The *bersagliere* hat, which became him so well, and which in sheer haste the lieutenant had to-day quite forgotten to take off, was in the way, so Signorina Carmela had to bend her head a little aside. But this made her all the more charming, and his mouth went eagerly to hers like a falcon to its prey. They were standing there silent, breathless, and happy, when a discreet cough brought them back to the present.

Signor Tallandini had stolen noiselessly into the room. He nodded pleasantly, and with a look of intelligence to the young pair; and behind him the Signora murmured a suppressed '*Dio mio.*'

'I shall talk to your parents, Nino,' he said, and clapped his future son-in-law on the shoulder. 'Now, let us first finish our breakfast.'

It was a lively, merry breakfast: that is to say, Signor Tallandini did the talking for himself and the others, and took care to do it thoroughly. At first, with the consideration for the opposing side that is a part of good manners, he spoke a little about the poor Turks, who managed their business so miserably badly. It would be, therefore, a benefit to them as well as to humanity in general, if Tripoli were annexed—

yes, simply annexed. Then he began to roll out a long circumstantial discourse on something which he described as the 'political tangle'; passing from this to the much talked-of Gordian knot that could not be untied, but only cut asunder with the sword.

Lieutenant Nino spurred him on to ever-increasing eloquence, putting in here and there an occasional 'Certainly' or 'Naturally.' He was exceedingly grateful for being allowed, at this small cost, to keep his eyes fixed in undisturbed peace on Signorina Carmela's pure features.

By means of an historical excursus, which included little of precise fact and was therefore all the longer, Signor Tallandini at last got to the duty of a civilised people towards nations in a lower stage of development. He would not exactly maintain that these backward peoples ought to be exterminated from the earth; on the contrary . . . but . . . well, they understood what he meant. . . . If he had been quite candid, he would have had to confess that he himself did not understand.

'Naturally!' Lieutenant Nino put in, and pressed the hand of his adored one under the table.

Signor Tallandini at once began upon the 'outlook for the future of civilisation,' and quoted, word for word, a couple of long extracts from the clerical newspaper that formed his daily reading. The signora gazed with admiration on her husband, and the two young people looked deep into each other's eyes.

Breakfast ended with everyone in the best of spirits. But, as the chairs were pushed away from the table, Lieutenant Nino came tumbling back with a plunge

into dull reality. Yes, it was the fact that his departure was fixed for that very afternoon. The regiment was mobilised. The officers had that morning received their orders for service. Under these circumstances, he must himself say that the formal publication of the engagement must be thought of only as soon as the war was over. But, as his beloved Carmela had given him her consent, he looked with a contented and joyful heart to the future which promised so much happiness.

Signor Tallandini had wine brought into the inner *salon*, and filled the glasses. Then he invited those present to come close around him; he wished to propose a toast. 'Unfortunately, he was no orator, however the twofold significance of the day . . . Well, they quite understood him. Therefore, To the welfare of their native land!' They drank in silence. Lieutenant Nino stood at attention as if on parade, and Signorina Carmela unconsciously imitated him. Then a glass to the health of their beloved children, who . . . who . . . his feelings overcame him. He brought out only some stammering words. The signora was already in tears.

When Lieutenant Nino went home an hour later, he was a happy man. His eyes beamed, his lips smiled, and the cock's plume fluttered in the wind. All the streets were astir with excitement. At every corner the extra editions of the papers were posted up, and the newsvendors were shouting louder than ever before. As he reached the Corso, Lieutenant Nino looked back. His Carmela was standing with her parents on the balcony, and waved a farewell greeting to him. The lieutenant gave a stately salute and smiled all over

his face. Handsome, high-spirited, courageous, young and happy, he turned the corner and was out of sight.

Arrived at home, he told his parents and his sisters, in one breath, of the war, of his love, and of his prospects for the future. He told how patriotic enthusiasm had struck like lightning into every heart, and set aglow a flame that would never henceforth be extinguished. The affair was, after all, only a short military excursion, that meant only a change for a few weeks or a couple of months at most. He would be promoted; he had already so thoroughly made up his mind that he would distinguish himself. He would climb high . . . and higher still . . . ; but it was better not to talk about that in anticipation. And Carmela, his well-beloved, adored bride that was to be, she was, meanwhile, waiting here at home for her conqueror. . . . His sisters must promise him to visit her every day, to dry her tears, to persuade her that after all there was no danger . . . in this merry ride in fine weather! So he would come back all right when it was over. . . . Those wretched Turks, indeed! likely enough they would have a rough time; but, after all, the more advanced nations had their duties. Once for all, it was a civilising mission, in the accomplishment of which he was about to take part. . . . They must promise him, though, to visit Carmela every day.

At five o'clock the train started from the central railway station in Rome, conveying the battalion to the south. Lieutenant Nino sat wedged in between two comrades, who, like himself, stared straight before them wrapped in thought. He was still revelling in the parting look that Carmela had cast upon him, sending with it her wishes for his good fortune. For,

of course, she had been with her parents, as well as his own parents and sisters, at the railway station to wave a last farewell to the departing troops. In a button-hole of his tunic he flaunted a rose that his adored one had given him before all the people, and his hand closed upon a little packet that she had at the last moment slipped into it. As soon as he had a quiet moment he meant to see what it contained.

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The great square outside the railway station was black with people. The fountains, with their massive statues of women, sent up their jets continually; but the plash of the falling water was drowned in the hum of the thousands gathered together there. The inevitable military band had just stopped playing. And now, out of the station buildings, came those who had been able to assert a right to secure admittance. They were mostly friends and relations of the soldiers and officers; but in their looks one could not see either anxiety or grief. The same sincere satisfaction, that was the keynote of everything on this memorable afternoon, showed itself in their looks and bearing. The important step had been so lately taken that no one yet was clear as to its full significance. But little waves of restlessness, such as precede a breaking-up, ran here and there like strong quiverings through the masses of people.

Amongst those who were slowly working their way through the crowd of spectators, were the Rivarato and Tallandini families.

In front went the two signoras, in animated conversation about their dear children and the trousseau,

which it really would be better to get ready at once, for, after all, the war could not last long. After them came Signorina Carmela between Lieutenant Nino's two sisters. One of them hung on each of her arms, and they kept asking her whether she did not feel terribly upset. Signorina Carmela smilingly shook her head. Why should she make herself uneasy ! Her Nino had assured her that it would be all over in a few weeks. Last came the two gentlemen. They were quite agreed as to the dowry and settlement. The interest of these and the pay of a full lieutenant . . . why not say a company captain at once, for a young man with Nino's capacity could not place his expectations too high ? . . . would go far enough in a small garrison town. The two gentlemen were absolutely of the same opinion, and nodded to each other to express their mutual understanding. Whereupon Signor Tallandini at once went on to treat of what he was to make his favourite theme now and for the next few weeks : the duty of the more advanced nations to reduce the more backward peoples to subjection in the interests of civilisation.

' And just think of the Church ! ' he exclaimed with lively enthusiasm. ' What a field for its missionary energies ! '

Signor Rivarato gave him a gentle poke in the ribs. It was perhaps not prudent to speak of such things in public. One could not know who would overhear one.

But to-day there were no differences of opinion. And everywhere the people looked with sympathetic eyes on the relatives of the soldiers as they passed in a long line by the way that the carbineers

and gendarmes kept open for them through the crowd.

Signor Tallandini smiled with an air of triumph at his prudent companion.

A quiver ran through the crowd, and a thundering '*Evviva*' echoed over the square. A radical deputy had just been delivering an oration a little farther on at a street corner, and, after praising the Government, which had been sagacious enough to perceive the psychological moment for action, he had called for a cheer for their native land.

When once the cheering began, the crowd kept it up. A band of music, that had suddenly appeared on the spot, broke out into a patriotic air that was continually accompanied by the '*Evvivas*' of the bystanders. Their excited movements, their flashing eyes, and the continual shouting, all were tokens of the enthusiasm of a people banding themselves together for a great task.

Signor Tallandini's smile broadened. He had invested a small part of his property in a business undertaking in Tripoli. Now the shares would rise, and . . . well, he had meant to give them to Carmela and Nino—that was not too much after what had happened. But, supposing the shares doubled in value, they would naturally be content with half . . . they might, perhaps, rise to such a price that five-and-twenty per cent. of the capital would be enough.

Signor Rivarato laughed aloud. He had heard passers-by talk of fireworks that were to be let off on the Capitol that evening, and he made, therefore, the proposal that they should go there. But Signorina

Carmela was anxious to be at home. The others smiled, and, with promises to meet soon again—there was now good reason for so doing—the two families separated.

The whole of that evening Signorina Carmela sat alone in her little bedroom. Beyond the agitation that it was the bounden duty of every good patriot to feel, she had no sense of excitement. All was peaceful, quiet, and calm as usual. And, after all, she went to sleep with a particularly pleasant picture in her mind. Soon—and indeed it was likely to be very soon—it would be her lot to go for a walk in the Corso leaning on a *bersagliere* officer wearing a row of medals for valour, and decorations.

At that same hour, in the train that was steadily rolling southwards, Lieutenant Nino sat gazing with eyes all bright with happiness at the opposite side of his compartment. He had opened the little packet and found therein a miniature of the Madonna. With it was a red-sealed paper which informed him that the picture had been blessed by the Holy Father himself. Surely, it would protect him from danger! and Lieutenant Nino vowed henceforth, and always, to wear it next to his heart. Then he closed his eyes and began to dream . . . the old everlasting dream of the young soldier—the dream of love and war.

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It was a few months later.

The sun poured down its wealth of light upon Rome. There was the usual moving crowd coming and going in the Corso. At times a few would stop; and at once

a group of curious folk would form. But they had nothing to say, and the crowd would disperse again, until some accident or the shouting of a news vendor would attract their attention.

The street—the corner of which Lieutenant Nino had turned, on as bright and sunny a morning as this, hurrying on with hopes as high as heaven—was now deserted and without a single passer-by. Only two old women stood before a house door, talking half-aloud and with continual nodding of their heads to each other. At the opening of a cellar a cat was sitting looking dreamily at the dusty pavement of the street. But, out of the same house that Lieutenant Nino had left a few months ago, accompanied by the tender looks of his adored one, there now came a crippled man who hobbled slowly and painfully towards the Corso. He was a young man, supporting himself with difficulty with the help of two stout sticks. He walked bent down, and it was with an effort that he drew the left foot forward. But, in the cripple's own opinion, that was nothing compared to the horribly disfigured state of his face. The left cheek had been cut open and stitched together again, the ear was gone, and the eye had been destroyed in its orbit, above which the forehead was still black with powder. It was the former lieutenant, now the half-pay Captain Nino Rivarato, leaving for ever the house of his intended.

He went on, step by step. His head hung down on his breast, and there was a bitter smile on the lips that only with an effort held back a sob. His thoughts turned persistently to the fight in the oasis, where his misfortune had come upon him.

It was on a sunny day just like this. His section had been pushed forward as an outpost, and lay half buried in the sand.

As long as he lived, Captain Rivarato would never forget the hours that followed.

He received with actual delight the report that the Turks were in movement. At last he would have a sight of this wretched enemy who, so far, had always persisted in slipping away.

As the first bullets whistled over his head, Lieutenant Nino nodded encouragingly to his men. They answered with a smile ; they were a little excited at this strange hissing sound in the air, but they were plucky and full of confidence, as became true *bersaglieri*. They blazed away their cartridges into the empty air. They even began to laugh as they got used to their unaccustomed experiences.

Then came the second stage of the fight, unexpectedly soon, and in every respect quite against the rules of the autumn manœuvres. Hardly two hundred yards away a row of red fezzes suddenly came in sight ; and though the section at once doubled the rapidity of its fire, they worked their way steadily nearer. Then, all at once, they sprang up from their cover, and came rushing on with deafening shouts of ' Allah ! ' At the same time a green standard rose up on the right and a mass of bare-legged, dark-skinned Arabs dashed like madmen at the position. Right in front of him Lieutenant Nino saw the poppy-red caps. They were all coming forward at him and his men, racing over the waves of sand, nearer and nearer, now disappearing in a cloud of dust, now emerging from it again. Great gaps opened out at times in their line ; but, all the same,

in the next second these were filled up by fresh crowds of men. It was like a race of mad rivalry, a hellish tumult, that raged relentlessly onward like a stormy flood.

The men of Nino's section fired without aiming, expended their cartridges without taking count of them; but held their ground bravely. All around rose the unceasing rattle of musketry—whether of friends or foes, he could not judge; and behind him a battery was thundering. He noticed some hollows in the sand close in front, called out to his soldiers to aim lower, and pointed with his sword to the assailants.

The red line drew nearer, pushing relentlessly forward. To the right the Allah shouts roared with the fury of a hurricane; to the left the Turks were working their way onward with headlong speed. Somewhere behind the section there was the thunder of cannon. There was an acrid, nauseating smell of singed cloth and blood. His gums were dry, but the sweat ran in streams down his cheeks.

Then there were sharply separated details that remained fixed in his memory. Just beside him a man fell, huddled together on all fours and stood up again at once, drew his limbs together, and then stretched himself on the ground with the unconscious, unfeeling, but precise movements of an automaton. His tunic was torn and covered with blood. Lieutenant Nino called out a question to him. As if he heard it, the man stopped stretching himself, and lay motionless. Lieutenant Nino saw that he was dead, and turned his eyes away to the other side. A corporal slipped out of the firing-line—a *bersagliere* corporal deserting his post and taking to flight in the midst of battle! A

blush of shame reddened Lieutenant Nino's cheeks, and he opened his mouth to recall the coward to his duty. But to his own surprise he said, loud and clear :

‘ This kind of thing is no real war . . . no, certainly not.’

Lieutenant Nino looked round him, fearful that some one might have heard the words. But no one was paying any attention, and he laughed with the sense of relief. And then at once he was serious again, for he had perceived that the corporal was wounded. The poor fellow—if he were to fall into the hands of the Turks . . . before he could think out the idea to the end, Lieutenant Nino's compassion for the wounded man was cut short ; for, close beside him, two men fell at the same moment. The one looked with a terrified face into the eyes of his officer ; the other lay on his back in an unnaturally constrained position with his knees drawn up to his chin, while slight quivers ran through his body. It was not possible for Lieutenant Nino to see the expression of his face, and yet at the moment he felt an eager longing to look at it. He stood up beside the poor fellow. A hurricane of projectiles came sweeping horizontally just above his head, so that the cock's plume fluttered in the wind of them. He dropped down again, and laid himself flat on the ground, trying to think and once more he murmured :

‘ This kind of thing is no real war . . . no, certainly not.’

He wanted to say something quite different ; but just these words found a way to his parched lips.

Behind him a dozen wounded were huddled

together in the sand. A hundred paces farther back a party of ambulance soldiers appeared; but they went out of sight again, at once, as if they had been swallowed up by the earth. The cannon thundered ever more fiercely. The stale, nauseating smell of blood tormented him. The sweat ran from every pore. But, then, it was a terribly hot day.

The shout of 'Allah' rang out nearer than before. The green standard on the right seemed to rush over the ground, staggered, went down for a moment, but was up high again and came nearer. It was now close on the right wing of the section that certainly could not hold it back for long. Lieutenant Nino raised himself on one knee. It was his duty to hasten to the threatened point. But the red caps were quite as near. The lieutenant glanced in perplexity now to the right, now towards the Turks.

A shell struck close to the right wing and exploded in a cloud of dust. A quiver ran down the ranks from man to man. 'Is it our own artillery or theirs that is firing at us?' was the question that flashed through Lieutenant Nino's brain. He never found the answer to it. For events now followed each other with bewildering speed, now standing out apart, now mingling one with another, and a score of dramatic scenes, each of which riveted the attention upon itself, were being played out all close by. Over the right there hung a dense cloud of dust and sand. He could see indistinctly how some of his brave *bersaglieri* sprang up and ran into it. High over them towered the green standard. Then a gust of wind—it was a wonder there was a breath of wind at all in this infernal heat

—made some rifts in the cloud. For a moment he caught glimpses of fluttering *burnous*, brown legs, wide-open mouths that looked like bloody wounds. Half the men on the right wing were out of action.

Lieutenant Nino sprang up. In his right hand he held his revolver ; in his left, his sword, with which he made hurried signals to his men. Hardly one of them had seen the signal, but at the same moment the men were on their feet. Instinct had told them all how dangerous it was to remain any longer in the prone position. A few hurried words, and they were all rallied close around their lieutenant.

The Turks were now hardly ten paces away. Lieutenant Nino cast a contemptuous look upon them. He saw a row of fixed, lustreless, dull eyes in the perspiring faces under the poppy-red headgear. A senseless yell came from their mouths, and they moved their feet like automata. They were weary, exhausted, at the end of their energy, and yet they ran forward. Lieutenant Nino took a careful aim at a tall fellow and pressed his pistol-trigger.

He had no time to see whether the bullet had reached its mark. A Turkish officer who had run forward some paces in front of his men had noticed Lieutenant Nino, and turned from the direction he had till then kept. With teeth clenched together and flashing eyes, he hurled himself upon his enemy. Hatred, and the longing for revenge, blazed in his eyes.

‘Why does he hate me? We have never seen each other, never exchanged a word,’ was the thought that came swimming through Lieutenant Nino’s brain.

Nevertheless, he bit his lips together ; aimed at the Turk, and fired. He was still running forward when Lieutenant Nino's revolver-shot rang out ; but two paces from his enemy, the Turk collapsed and came crashing to the ground. He tore up the sand with his hands ; his revolver, with its long since emptied cartridge-pouch, struck against one of the lieutenant's feet, his head swung sidelong, as if his neck were broken. Then he turned his face to his enemy, spat madly out some Turkish word of insult, and rolled heavily over on his side.

Then came the misfortune.

As if he had sprung out of the yet warm body of the fallen man, a Turkish soldier leapt at him from the ground itself. All expression of intelligence was gone from the man's eyes, and his lower jaw hung loosely down ; but his arms accomplished their work. Obliquely from below, his bayonet drove into Lieutenant Nino's head. The sharp edge of it ran through the left cheek, scraping against the jaw-bone. It felt as if something had exploded in his brain. And at once there followed another explosion ; for, at the moment that the bayonet-stab went in, the Turk had fired his rifle. A fierce burning as the nerves reacted to hitherto undreamt-of pain ; the muscles contracted only to become completely relaxed in the next second ; Lieutenant Nino fell down without further effort, and lay unconscious.

How long he lay there senseless he knew not. It seemed to him as if something immeasurably heavy was, after a certain interval, pressing one of his legs down into the sand. There was a noise and din like thunder. Lieutenant Nino felt as if the heavens

were falling down and the earth sinking away, and, with a hoarse groan, he stammered out :

‘Carmela . . . water . . . ! I am burning !’

.

He awoke faint and weak in a hospital shed, and a volunteer ambulance-man told him how the regiment had made a brilliant bayonet charge. The Turks had been thoroughly beaten. Lieutenant Nino knew that it was his duty to be glad at this, but he felt no gladness.

The attendant looked down at him with a strange questioning expression in his eyes, and as if from an endless distance. Lieutenant Nino felt frightened, and put his right hand up to his head, which was enveloped in bandages ; but he did not dare to ask anything. Wearily he closed his eyes and fell into a dull painful sleep.

A month later he left the hospital and joined a convoy of wounded who were being sent to the home country. He was still far from being restored to health—that might take months yet—but he wanted to be at home. He was a cripple, and frightfully disfigured. A mirror had told him this ; and a wild terror of something that he had never imagined he would have to endure, seized upon him as for the first time he looked upon the empty eye-socket. And below it there was the severed cheek, on which stood out clearly the scars of the stitches that had been put in to sew the wound together. Then there was his foot. That was a very simple story. The artillery had been pushed forward and occupied the hill that his section had so heroically defended. It was then that a

gun-wheel went over an instep of the fallen lieutenant. Such things happen in every war and cannot be avoided. It is not so easy to guide horses that have become half wild ; haste, noise, and confusion account for everything.

When this explanation was imparted to him, Lieutenant Nino bowed his head and limped out between his two sticks. He was deep in thought and only said in a broken voice :

‘ This kind of thing is no real war . . . no, certainly not.’

It sounded like a protest against some secret doubt ; and those who heard him shrugged their shoulders as they looked after the cripple. It was a real stroke of good luck that he was lying in soft sand, otherwise an amputation would have been necessary.

Then came the heartily friendly farewell of his comrades. All the officers of the regiment came in a body to visit him before he started for home.

Captain Vitale—a distinguished soldier—spoke for all the others.

‘ Rivarato—brave young man—your gallant defence . . . um . . . made . . . um . . . the unexpectedly happy result of our attack possible. Not we, but you, are *the victor*. If you had abandoned the position . . .’

‘ Such a thing never even came into my mind,’ stammered Lieutenant Nino, quite embarrassed.

‘ . . . We would have had a much harder task,’ Captain Vitale went on ; and then, turning to the other officers : ‘ Do you hear ? It never even came into his mind that he could retire !—Attention ! At the salute !’

Allow me . . . um . . . in the name of the regiment . . . um . . . I thank *the victor* !'

Soon after this, Lieutenant Nino went home with the certainty that he would be promoted to the rank of captain. At the same time, he would of course be pensioned off, for he was utterly unfit for military service. He saw in his promotion a very poor consolation for his forced retirement. But his Carmela would . . . He did not end the sentence. When he was not thinking of the young girl, who most assuredly would keep her pledge to him, he was brooding over what had befallen him.

They had talked, indeed, of a merry riding excursion, with, perhaps, some little adventures on the way. Instead of that, he had all the time run up against filth, privation, and indescribable toil. The lively joyous march under fluttering flags and to the clang of music, the storm of cheers, the excitement of victory—in short, all that makes war poetical, and the aspect of it one sees in the illustrated papers—was simply something non-existent. It was nothing else but an everlasting burrowing in sand; hunger and thirst. Then one had to be looking after one's men who would be continually blundering into a thousand bits of imprudence; and worry about oneself at the same time with the haunting fear of having made some mistake or overlooked something of importance. The whole thing was a wild medley of ambushes, wretched little stratagems, useless talk, and insuperable difficulties that one tried to wriggle out of. It went on mostly with the help of chance, which, on the whole, was favourable; for the two adversaries were about equally involved in the muddle.

The climax of it all was that hard contested fight in which he was maimed for life, he and a dozen others. Not only were they denied the hero's death, with its fame for all the future, but they were cast aside like useless lumber. The hand-to-hand conflict had degenerated into a frantic fight of mad dogs, snapping at each other's throats. It was fear, hate, thirst for vengeance, that guided the hands and directed the weapons; it was . . . well, nothing like what he had expected or imagined. . . . All that he had read in the school and the military academy had been swept out of his conscious knowledge by the brutal reality. With the naïve vexation of a disappointed child, he would often repeat to himself the words that had come to his tongue at that moment when there dawned upon him a dark suspicion of his own mistake and that of so many others :

'This kind of thing is no real war . . . no, certainly not !'

.

The former lieutenant of *bersaglieri*, Nino Rivarato, stopped in the street with a deep sigh and rested a while. Every step was an effort for him.

His meeting with his betrothed had been the most painful moment of his life. The gesture of horror and involuntary aversion with which, at the sight of him, Signorina Carmela had buried her face in her hands would for ever remain in his memory. And it made mercilessly clear to him that this dream had been nothing but a dream. A further insistence on the fulfilment of the engagement would befit no man

who stood upon his dignity. With an infinite sense of weary misery, the former Lieutenant Nino Rivarato saw Signorina Carmela move falteringly out of the room, supported on the arm of her mother. Yet she had known long since that he was wounded, she had had time to prepare herself for this, and . . . Lieutenant Nino shrugged his shoulders, the whole thing was so utterly hopeless.

Signor Tallandini accompanied him to the door. He was in a bad humour and made no secret of it. This stupid war had already lasted far too long. His Tripoli shares had not risen in any way as he hoped ; on the contrary, they were now almost worthless. Really, it was no time for thinking about weddings.

'War!' snarled Signor Tallandini. 'A civilised nation does not involve itself in that kind of folly ! Culture and higher development present other tasks to it.'

Lieutenant Nino had taken his departure in the midst of a dissertation on the nature and significance of these tasks.

A few steps from the corner of the street he once more came to a standstill and sighed. The cat at the cellar door ran off in a fright, and the two old women stared curiously at the disfigured cripple.

'Other tasks,' thought the half-pay Captain Nino Rivarato, shrugging his shoulders indifferently. 'Yes, there are plenty of them for individuals and for whole nations. Everywhere tasks are waiting that are necessary, imperative, full of hope for the future ; but they will never be fulfilled. Most of them will be shirked ; the rest will be forgotten or bungled. In other words, we must always be preparing for war

and for death, because peace and life have lost their significance in comparison with these two things that most people consider far more important.'

Weary and listless, he hobbled on between his two sticks, and disappeared in the crowds of the Corso.

IV

THE FANTASIA

SHEIKH ABDALLAH rose in all his imposing height. His great beard, in which a few iron-grey hairs were conspicuous, flowed down his broad chest. From under his half-closed eyelids the sheikh gazed straight before him. He drew a deep breath, filling his lungs with air, and began to speak.

‘ You tell me that the Italians have broken the peace, and unprovoked have attacked the children of the Prophet. Your words ring strangely in my ears. Your “unprovoked” seems to me so significant, that a deeper meaning must underlie the word.’

‘ Sheikh Abdallah Ibn Hamkal, my words contain the truth and nothing but the truth,’ replied the Turkish officer, who had risen when his host stood up.

‘ The truth—may it be glorified and increased ! And may the Unbelievers, blinded with its light, become as new-dropped dogs ! ’ The words, although Abdallah hissed them out between his tight-set lips, were distinctly audible in every corner of the room. For a moment he stood impassive. Then his strained features relaxed, and with a salaam he bade his guest

farewell. Slowly he crossed the room to the compound ; between two of the columns he paused, and said, over his right shoulder : ' I will communicate my resolution to-morrow evening.'

The Turkish officer made a movement as if he meant to detain the sheikh with an objection. The objection was never uttered, for in the eyes of the young man standing opposite to him he encountered a look of warning.

' Keep quiet !' counselled everything about the emotionless figure.

The Turk morosely shrugged his shoulders. To take his cue from this silent admonition was, perhaps, his wisest course.

For one minute the three men who were left in the room stood looking at one another. So long as Sheikh Abdallah had been present, he alone had been the cynosure of all eyes.

' Will you not sit down ?' asked the man who had silenced the Turk with a glance.

' With pleasure !' The officer sank back to the cushions and drew up his legs. He looked expectantly at the young man who had just spoken.

' Djafar Ibn Hamkal,' replied the latter, interpreting the glance as a question.

' Fermal Bey,' quickly returned the Turk, although this was the second time he had mentioned his name.

Djafar thanked him with a bow of the head and pointing to the third person present, ' My brother Mansur,' said he.

' Who does not know Abdallah Ibn Hamkal's sons ?' was the Turk's courteous reply.

Djafar gazed straight in front of him as if he had

not even heard the remark, but Mansur flushed with satisfaction.

The two brothers had taken a seat side by side. A short silence ensued.

‘You are come out of season,’ began Djafar.

‘Such news as mine is never in season,’ parried Fermal Bey, with a smile; ‘to say nothing of the messenger who delivers it.’

‘Your news is several days old, captain.’

Fermal Bey looked away, and for a few seconds endeavoured to grasp the meaning concealed in this answer.

‘You surely do not think . . .’

Djafar raised a protesting hand.

‘Your coming is not opportune,’ he said, ‘only because we are this week solemnising my brother’s wedding. Nothing else was meant.’

‘That explains the Bedouin encampment that I saw before the city gates. I rejoice, Djafar Ibn Hamkal, that you are mistaken. But mistaken you certainly are; I could never have come at a better time.’

‘If my father gives you his answer by to-morrow evening, then I too shall know whether your coming is seasonable or not.’

Fermal Bey leapt up from his cushion.

‘Djafar . . . and you, Mansur, you are both sons of a Marabout,’¹ he eagerly began. ‘One of you must one day inherit the honour. When that time comes, one or perhaps even both of you will become saints. To belong to such a race as yours imposes obligations. What more need I say?’

¹ A devout Mussulman;

Djafar and Mansur turned their eyes upon the Turk; the only expression on their faces was one of quiet astonishment at their guest's unseemly vehemence.

'Are you not tired after your ride?' asked Djafar at length.

Fermal Bey bit his under-lip. He saw how gravely he had sinned against etiquette, and he regretted it; but he was too proud to beg pardon.

'So you think I must wait until to-morrow evening,' said Fermal Bey with a twitch of his shoulders, irritated by their impassiveness.

'You are free to use your own judgment.'

'The horses need rest.'

Djafar assented with a nod: that was an answer which he could understand.

A few minutes wore away.

Fermal Bey thought over his commission. He was to gather together the clans in the south-western part of the country and lead them to the coast. Should he succeed in inducing Sheikh Abdallah to break camp, the object of his mission would be to a great extent attained. Let a rumour of the chieftain's ride to the north but leak out, and the Bedouins for many miles around would follow his example. Their fighting spirit would be kindled, and even from across the border fresh hordes would pour in, willing to fight against the Infidels.

The brothers sat as still as statues. Their thoughts were busy with the tidings brought in by the Turk—tidings which were really no news at all since rumours of an Italian attack had been noised abroad during the whole of the summer. But these reports had always

turned out to be untrue. Neither the Italians nor yet the French, only a two-days' journey away, had appeared. Sheikh Abdallah, too, had hinted darkly of the ever-deferred attack; but he had never given his sons to understand how he intended them to act. The wily Djafar would sometimes fancy that his father would sit at home with his hands in his lap, or perhaps even sell his co-operation to the highest bidder. The Turks were nothing if not unpopular . . . and the Unbelievers . . . well, they would, presumably, remain at the coast. Not with so much as a look did Djafar betray his thoughts.

Mansur had let his chin fall on his breast. He did not share Djafar's gift of complete self-control.

'The fight,' he thought, 'the fight of which you used to dream as a boy, is now awaiting you.' He heaved a heavy sigh. Surely his father would not say No. And he quickly ran over in his mind what Fermal Bey had just related. The Italians had begun to bombard Tripoli, without so much as declaring war. With cannons, of whose size he could form no idea, they had shattered buildings and mutilated human beings. And, after the town had been evacuated by the Turkish garrison, it had been occupied by the aliens.

A sigh burst from Mansur's breast. The matter was to him incomprehensible. No challenge, no intimation as to what was to happen, only a curt 'Clear out of this . . . or else . . .'. He looked sympathetically at the Turk, who had so vividly described the rage of the garrison, and the cold fury of the officers obliged to leave everything behind them in their flight before those terrible cannons dominating the whole coastline. A deep blush spread over Mansur's cheeks. The

brutality of the sudden attack, and the cynicism of grabbing a country which belonged to others, infuriated him. Why not have procured an equal number of cannons—cannons with the same power to strike terror? That was the whole question. Why . . .? Mansur clenched his hands. Was it not his duty to defend the country of his co-religionists? He unclenched his fists, and his arms sank slowly down to his sides. Next evening he was to see his bride for the first time. Could he leave her? . . . would he leave her?

‘Rumours are like the wind,’ said Djafar beside him.

‘But truth is like the rays of the sun,’ retorted Fermal Bey. ‘They penetrate all things with their blinding light.’

Djafar nodded his head. The Turk was a skilful diplomat.

Once more a brief silence arose. The eyes of the three men met in searching inquiry, turned aside, and then crossed again.

‘The sun is going down,’ said Djafar at last. ‘Even if you are come unbidden, we yet hope you will share our evening meal and be present at our fantasia to-morrow. Many were invited, and many who were not have, nevertheless, put in an appearance. Sheikh Abdallah’s sons have a shake-down and food enough for all.’

‘I shall stay here since such is your wish.’

‘My father’s will directs everything; my own nothing. Who am I that Sheikh Abdallah Ibn Hamkal and Djafar should be named in the same breath?’

Fermal Bey bent his head in order to hide the smile which involuntarily curled his lips at this excessive humility.

A sidelong glance, swift and mistrustful; then Djafar lowered his eyes. He got up somewhat quicker than usual and politely inquired :

‘ Will you come with me ? ’

Fermal Bey followed his host's eldest son, while Mansur walked behind them, dreamy and silent. They stepped across the open quadrangle; its one beauty was a cluster of climbing roses: they covered the walls up to the roof of the house. At the other side of the courtyard was a row of apartments; all were small and low. A few benches with bright-coloured coverlets, together with one or two footstools, composed the whole of the furniture. Had the Turk not known from the first that Abdallah Ibn Hamkal counted as one of the most influential sheikhs in the whole of Tripoli, he would, at sight of these simple appointments, have felt a misgiving and have regarded his mission as a failure. As it was, he merely asked himself whether this shabby bareness was not purposely meant to deceive. He believed he might answer Yes, with a quiet mind. Assuredly, Sheikh Abdallah, the head of the Malachite sect in that part of the country, knew what he was doing and what he was leaving undone. Once more the Turk smiled a subtle smile of fellow-feeling.

Djafar strode across the middle of the compound instead of following, as would have been simplest, the colonnade which ran round it. Fermal Bey did not give this a thought, until for the third time he bore to the left. Then he divined that there was

something which his companion wished to show him. His eyes darted quickly on every side. On his right lay a room in partial darkness, and in it sat Sheikh Abdallah on a pile against the wall. Was it Djafar's intention to conduct him to that room? No; Djafar passed on, apparently without noticing his father. The officer's eyes peered wide-awake into the small white-washed chamber, whilst he purposely slackened his pace in order to gain a moment or two.

Majestic and motionless, the sheikh was enthroned on a mountain of bolsters and cushions. He held in his hand a scroll of paper, while similar scrolls lay about him. His eyes stared straight forward, wide open and glittering. Not a twitch of the lids betrayed that he had noticed the passer-by. The Turk flashed one last glance upon the sheikh. No; that was no pretence on the latter's part; it was . . . ecstasy. Sheikh Abdallah's eyes were riveted on the white ceiling overhead. Everything round about him was lost to sight. The world no longer existed; the marabout was communing with his God.

Fermal Bey's steps grew noiseless. He turned round to Mansur, whose breath blew warm upon his neck.

'God is just,' said the young man enthusiastically.

The impression of something supernatural vanished when Fermal Bey lost sight of the sheikh. He bit his lower lip and thought crossly that his commission was no easy one. The youth behind him was won, but how about his elder brother? The officer shook his head; Djafar's closeness and craft was not to his liking. And the old man whose inspirations came through his prayers to Allah . . . he . . . The

young Turk, with his European training, again bit his lips.

Djafar stopped at the door of a room, exactly like the one they had just passed, and showed his guest in first. Fermal Bey thanked him with an inclination of the head.

The dishes were already served up. They stood on an octagonal table no higher than a bench. On the floor were spread a few mats. Fermal Bey pretended not to notice the affected simplicity in everything, and sat down on a mat opposite the door, and then began to eat with his fingers.

The meal consisted of cooked rice, the inevitable *kous-kous*, figs, and dates. The drink was spring-water or else sour milk.

Nobody spoke a word ; the one thing which broke the silence in the room was when, every now and then, Djafar gave a sort of grunt. Evidently the eldest son of the sheikh aimed at appearing in all things a true Bedouin of the desert. Fermal Bey sat with his legs tucked under him. He affected a grave demeanour, but his eyes at times went quickly hither and thither. The silence began to jar upon him.

'Are you tired?' asked Djafar, after he had grunted his satisfaction several times running.

'Not exactly, but . . .'

'I will show you to your room.'

And Djafar stood up before Fermal Bey had even answered. All his movements were quick and cat-like ; but at the same time so energetic, that they put one in mind of something worked on an ingenious system of powerful springs.

With a bow, Fermal Bey returned thanks for the

meal and followed his guide. He realised that no conference was meant to be held that night. He had performed his errand; the long-expected had come to pass. Night would awake in the old man the inspiration which might perhaps bring the war to a crisis.

The way back led past the room in which Sheikh Abdallah was enthroned in all his impassiveness. When Fermal Bey stole another look at him, it was to find that he had not changed his position. The scroll—probably the commentary of some learned man on one or more chapters of the Koran—he still held, in the same way. His eyes were steadily raised to the ceiling.

Djafar led his guest up a dark flight of stairs in which a few bricks had long been missing, and conducted him into a small dusky chamber. With a wave of his hand he pointed out the couch against a wall, and informed his companion that lamp and tinder-box stood in the corner with a water-cooled tobacco-pipe.

Fermal Bey thanked him for his courtesy.

‘One word, Djafar Ibn Hamkal,’ said he, as the former turned to go. ‘Will you send me my companion, Sergeant Esjuk? I have something to say to him.’

‘I will send a servant to the inn to fetch him.’ And Djafar slipped noiselessly away into the background of the staircase.

Fermal Bey called a parting word after him and received a friendly response. After which the Turk gave a shrug of his shoulders.

This delay between resolution and action exasperated him. Here, surely, if anywhere, haste was

justified. He had come at the wrong moment . . . ; but, after all, was not the outbreak of the war reason enough for his presence ? The wedding festivities ? But, then, he thought impatiently, the affairs of the individual must give way to . . . to . . . how was he to put it ? Well, then, if it were a question of the ' to be or not to be ' of Islam, the most fitting place for that struggle was here among the Bedouins. Fermal Bey smiled ambiguously. Doubt, contempt, fear, hope, dejection and impatience were all expressed in that smile of his. Then he once more shrugged his shoulders, lighted the tobacco-pipe, and sat himself down to wait.

After a while a firm step was heard on the stairs, whereupon a shadow emerged out of the darkness by the doorway. Sergeant Esjuk strode into the middle of the room and struck his heels together.

' Well, sergeant, what have you to say ? ' asked the captain, after he had returned the greeting with a nod.

' The business is clinched.'

' What ! . . . what is that you say ? ' And Fermal Bey leaped to his feet at once.

' The sheikh dares not say anything but " Yes ".'

' Are you sure of your facts, sergeant ? '

' Yes. The sheikh's servants are one and all about their business in the town. They turn up all over the place and talk to everyone.' The sergeant broke off with a short laugh, and then continued : ' Here, inland, they do not exactly ask what is stirring on the coast. The road is long and toilsome. But, that the Infidels—may the hand of Allah press them down—should attack the children of the Prophet without a

declaration of war, out of sheer greediness and nothing else, that cries aloud for vengeance.'

'And how . . . ?'

'Now, all have a mind to be avengers.'

Fermal Bey scanned the tall, bony figure in the worn-out, soiled uniform. He had been given a treasure of an assistant.

'And the sheikh?' asked the sergeant, forgetting in his zeal the respect due to his superior.

'He will not give his answer before to-morrow afternoon.'

'Between now and then he will learn what people are thinking.' Again the sergeant gave his short, dry laugh. He was clearly sure of his ground.

The captain heaved a sigh of relief. His thoughts now took another turn, and he looked forward with confidence to the coming day.

'Have you had a word with the son Djafar? He is a sly dog and his influence, I fear, is greater than his father's. As for the second son, the youth who is going to get married . . . bah!' And Esjuk gave a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders.

'The same thought has occurred to me as well, more or less.'

The sergeant nodded.

'Young Mansur, or whatever his name is, does not count. But the other, do not lose sight of him, captain. The sheikh has several wives, Djafar being by the first. And although the sheikh had bound himself not to marry any more so long as they lived, he yet took another wife a few years later. His first wife—Djazira was her name—came from the desert. With her son Djafar she fled to her clan. A Bedouin woman

never forgives a broken promise. There she stayed. The tribe is powerful, her father having a great number of camels and horses and great droves of cattle. Sheikh Abdallah behaved as if nothing had happened. He is not only a pious man, he is also a prudent one. Djafar, fifteen years after his mother's flight—she is still alive—returned to his father and claimed his rights as the eldest son. He has not got them yet, but here he still remains. Djafar is a man who must be won over.'

'You know a great deal, Esjuk.'

'We Bedouins,' replied the sergeant, raising his head with pride as he alluded to his extraction, 'had rather be silent than speak. But when we do speak, we speak out.'

'I will not forget what you say.'

The sergeant nodded.

'Many hundred—perhaps a thousand—Bedouins,' he continued, 'have come together on purpose to witness the fantasia to-morrow. The tribe of Ibn Hamkal has always been famous for its liberality. I have already had speech with some of the guests, and if you will let me go now, I can have a word with a good many more.'

Fermal Bey smiled approvingly on the keen sergeant. When he set out to enlist recruits among the tribes of the south, he had asked that Esjuk might be his companion. The man was not only a native of those parts and therefore better fitted than the Turk from beyond the sea to win confidence, but he also possessed that patient perseverance which, in the long run, reaches the goal. The captain took a handful of tobacco out of the box by the big pipe and gave it to the sergeant.

'I can tell you this, sir,' exclaimed the latter with a grin of satisfaction, 'we came at a seasonable hour for ourselves.' Then he took the tobacco.

'And at a seasonable one for us as well,' rang out Djafar's voice from the darkness of the doorway.

Fermal Bey involuntarily clenched his hands. Had Djafar been listening or . . . ?

Djafar divined his thoughts, and said :

'I was just coming upstairs to ask if my guest had everything he wanted. You speak very loud, sergeant, and I have quick ears. Pardon me if I have disturbed an important interview.' He spoke quite simply ; but Fermal Bey still thought he could detect a slight sneer in the words. 'What can I do for you ?'

'Thank you . . . humph !'

'You have let your pipe go out ; don't you want to smoke ? The air is close ; perhaps a cool drink ?' Even before Fermal Bey could frame an answer Djafar clapped his hands together.

A dark figure emerged from the staircase.

'Mechuel ! refreshments.'

Again the man disappeared ; he had clearly been standing outside the door, and the captain asked himself for how long.

'Mechuel is my friend and obedient servant,' explained Djafar in a tone of assumed indifference. 'He is a Jew by birth, and long professed the objectionable doctrines of his people. But four years ago he forswore his delusion, and ever since has been a zealous servant of the Prophet. Perhaps this joyful occurrence has come to your knowledge before now ?'

'Oh, now I do remember !' cried Sergeant Esjuk.

‘ Good. But I did not ask you.’

The sergeant took no notice of the haughty tone ; all he did was to blink his eyes humorously. Fermal Bey took this as a hint to be on his guard. He set his subordinate’s mind at rest with a smile.

‘ Is he to remain here ? ’ asked Djafar, who had noticed their by-play.

‘ Have you any objection ? ’ parried Fermal Bey, whilst he privately asked himself how much of the conversation the Arab had overheard.

‘ No, he is to go,’ replied Sergeant Esjuk in the place of his superior. He too had drawn his own conclusion from Djafar’s sudden entrance.

‘ In that case you had better go straight to Juaian. Not long ago fifty Bedouins at least encamped there from the region of El Mur and Ufana. The report of the fantasia had spread even to them. For a whole day and a whole night they rode without stopping. You will perhaps find friends among them.’

‘ From El Mur, did you say ? It is more than twenty years ago since I left home, but among fifty men of El Mur there will surely be a kinsman of Esjuk Bu Said. Thank you for the information.’ The sergeant struck his heels together and raised his right hand to his fez, saying : ‘ Captain ! ’

‘ For the present, sergeant.’

Another moment and Esjuk Bu Said was hurrying downstairs.

‘ Your servant knows how to bestir himself.’

‘ He is my comrade, not my servant.’

‘ And yet must obey all your orders ? ’

‘ He is of lower rank than myself.’ And, as if to put a stop to further questions in the matter, Fermal

Bey added: 'The reason is that I had a better education than he has had.'

'Education, that is the main point.' And Djafar nodded gravely and said half to himself: 'Knowledge, that is all.' Then, raising his voice, he went on talking, once more the obliging host, who thinks of nothing but his guest's well-being: 'Have you any objection if I ask you a few questions?'

'I came here for no other reason than to answer as many as possible.'

'Good. I wish to have a chat with you, for I want to know a great deal. First, I wonder if what you know is better worth knowing than what I know already.'

Fermal Bey looked thoughtfully at the man before him. Undeniably, Djafar Ibn Hamkal was beginning almost to awe him.

'I am at your service,' he answered readily.

'Even if I meant to bother you the whole night long?'

'Oh, as long as . . .'

'My questions would have no end in many nights; you settle the answers yourself.'

Fermal Bey assented with a nod.

Djafar went to the door and called downstairs:

'Are you there, Mechuel?'

'I am coming, Sidi Djafar.'

Whilst the Jew was carrying in a low table on which stood a large bowl and some cigarettes, Fermal Bey found occasion to study the fellow. His appearance, in no way improved by the loss of an eye, pleased him not. His movements were under control, but the Turk could not help thinking of a wild beast in a cage.

He told himself that he would not like to meet Mechuel on a lonely road—not at any rate without a loaded revolver in his hand.

‘On the balcony?’ asked Djafar, politely.

Fermal Bey made an affirmative gesture, leaving his host to make what arrangements he liked.

Mechuel, who either could understand his master without words or else had received his orders beforehand, carried the table out on the balcony; in next to no time he had arranged two cushions and then stood waiting at the door.

‘Do you mind Mechuel’s sitting down on the stairs?’ asked Djafar. ‘In that way he will keep off uninvited listeners and learn as well himself.’

‘As you please.’

‘Then sit down on the stairs, Mechuel. Listen and learn!’

Djafar’s confidential man glided noiselessly out of the room.

‘He is a faithful servant,’ explained the host, adding with a shrug: ‘for he knows that I hold his life in my hands.’

Curious as to what was to happen, Fermal Bey took a seat at the table.

‘I overheard a part of your conversation with your comrade the sergeant.’ When at this frank and unexpected avowal the captain turned quickly to him, Djafar continued with lofty composure: ‘I came to beg you to grant me this interview. I was, perhaps, somewhat too eager, which explains that I forgot all about Esjuk Bu Said. What he said about me is true. His words, that you came at a seasonable hour for yourself, are also correct. For that very

reason our interview must not in the meantime turn on that. I want to talk about the world. What do you know of it ? ’

‘ Of . . . what do you mean, Djafar Ibn Hamkal ? ’

‘ I want to know how Europe, which is next to the smallest continent and whose peoples have fallen out with one another, can nevertheless ill-treat and grind down not merely individual nations, but whole races as well. Can you explain that to me ? ’

‘ Humph ! Civilisation . . . I scarcely know what to answer you.’

‘ I ask for thoughts, and you give me a name, “Civilisation,” as if I, too, had not turned the word over and over with my tongue. It has a vile taste and I spit it out again. Civilisation is your answer. When the Italian ironclads cast anchor outside the roadstead off Tripoli, civilisation ordered that the Turkish garrison should leave the town without striking a blow. But it in no way prevented the Italians from shooting its houses in pieces with their cannons, or from slaying the people to whom the houses belonged, if any were still there. I have a feeling of nausea every time my ears hear the word “civilisation.” What I know of it is, that it bestows excellent weapons on the Unbelievers, together with the power of making the most reckless use of them, whenever there is anything to be gained. To make my meaning clearer to you I will tell you something of my thoughts and hopes. This war is as seasonable to some as it is unseasonable to as many others. To me it can be of use. But enough of that. This war is waged by the Italians, but with the consent of Europe. Its motives are vanity, jealousy, and greed.’

Fermal Bey made a sign as if he wished to say a word, but Djafar took no notice, and quietly continued :

‘ For all their disunion the Europeans are not afraid of acting all the world over in the same fashion. Civilisation has never stood in the way of their slaying and plundering. It is in every respect a boon for them, but in most cases an evil for others. The good it bestows—namely, the quick-firing guns and far-reaching rifles—we can turn to our own use. Whether we like it or not, we must take that course. The nations of Europe cannot ask us to treat them otherwise than they are treating us. Not long ago, a people, the Japanese, joined the ranks of the civilised Powers. A great war was the stepping-stone. They had no sooner triumphed over their enemy and yours, than nations who had hitherto looked down upon them hailed them as brothers. Do you see now what I am driving at ? Very well, then ! The sons of the Prophet outnumber the Europeans. They alone inhabit North and Central Africa, and in Asia they are everywhere to be found. Chinamen and Japanese will realise by degrees that their interests and ours are one. Europe is driving them to it by her blind presumption. Well, we belong, you know, to Europe—at any rate, you Turks belong. Keep the gates open, and arms shall not be wanting. Get us weapons and also men to teach us how to use them—that is your job. You have let much time slip by, but it is not even yet too late. Look sharp and knot the threads together from the shore of the ocean in the West to the coast of the seas in the remotest East. When everything is ready the storm will break out of its own accord. There is

really a God, Turk. And righteousness is no empty word, as is the civilisation of the Europeans !'

Fermal Bey shrank away from the prospect unfolded by this visionary.

'Not a word to me of the difficulties,' resumed Djafar passionately, as if he had divined his listener's thoughts. 'We are being inexorably compelled to unite, our own safety requires no less. Europe is saving us the greatest part of the work. This war, I tell you, comes at the right time for us. Whether the Italians are victorious or not is of no importance, but their aggression has opened the eyes of thousands who were formerly asleep. Cannot you hear the roar that heralds the storm? Behold, that is how Europe is acting, who boasts of her civilisation and a higher culture. In the midst of peace, one of her Powers, with the approval of the others, is attacking her Turkish neighbour—and that is Europe !'

'You are right, and then again you are wrong.'

Djafar shrugged his shoulders and then burst out again, without allowing himself to be upset by the objection.

'And why? I have told you that already. For the time being, the number of those who have rubbed the sleep out of their eyes is still small ; but to-morrow another European Power will do what Italy has been doing here. And I tell you, Turk, that as I think, so think many in Africa, in Asia Minor, in India, China, Japan—everywhere. Europe takes care that the inducement shall nowhere be wanting. Let us be grateful to the peoples of Europe and say with me : " Their will be done ! " '

The passionate vehemence in Djafar's speech had

swept Fermal Bey along with it. He nodded his head and his eyes flashed. If they talked like that on the borders of the desert, verily, the cause of Islam was not lost.

‘It may take a decade, or even several generations, before the struggle begins,’ resumed Djafar once more. ‘But what does that matter? Let Europe pave the way, let the civilised nations sow their dragons’ teeth. They shall also reap. Hatred is as good an incentive as greed. Who wins the day, myself or my sons, is of no consequence. The day will be ours. Now I have told you something of my thoughts. It is now your turn to talk.’

Fermal Bey’s eyes were fastened, keen and searching, on Djafar Ibn Hamkal. He was glad to have heard this. But he also wondered whether it was not the voice of one crying in the wilderness which resounded here. And his thoughts flew to the countless thousands who never think.

‘You are forgetting one thing,’ he began dejectedly. Djafar leaned over the table.

‘You mean the mollahs,’ he whispered. ‘I have thought of them too. I am the eldest son of my father, you know, and am one day to be a marabout, even as he is. True, the state declines in which the priests have too much influence. That affects Europe every whit as much as it affects us. Do not forget either that Islam has no homeland. The whole world belongs to it. You know that as well as I do. Tell me what you know of the alliance in which Germany, the disinterested friend of Turkey, is an equally disinterested ally of Italy, the enemy of Turkey.’

Fermal Bey puffed at his pipe, and thought over

how he was to open such a comprehensive topic. Djafar's imperious character had completely overmastered him, and he began his instruction in a somewhat hesitating tone. He soon warmed to his subject, the words came tripping off his tongue, and the thoughts begot new thoughts in unbroken succession. The Turkish officer had never before divined how much insight he possessed because he had never been in a situation in which he might need it. Now he followed new ideas which were engendered of the hour, now he developed and went deep into problems wherewith his brain till then had never busied itself.

Djafar Ibn Hamkal sat like an image of bronze. He gave vent to no token either of approbation or of contradiction. But the speaker never lost the impression that his listener allowed no word to escape him. And as soon as the subject was exhausted and Fermal Bey silent, Djafar immediately put in a question which turned the conversation into a new channel.

Hours wore away, but the Turk never once felt tired. What he called his victory was in the balance. And whilst he was talking of the possibility of the great European war whereof the foes of Europe dreamed, he thought only of what had brought him to Tripoli and thence to the outskirts of the wilderness.

The impenetrable darkness of the night wrapped itself more and more round the two men. Above them was arched the starry sky of Africa. There was not a breath of wind. Out of an invisible garden there stole a faint scent of the last roses of autumn.

Fermal Bey went on talking. His words fell fast, the thoughts waxed warm. And yet to him they seemed sluggish and half-hearted in comparison with

that thrilling and tremendous prospect which Djafar's speech had just called forth. With an almost visionary acuteness he showed his hearers the different links in the unending chain of fate—a chain which, somewhere or other in the far distance, was being forged by human infatuation and human malice for the purpose of putting the world in fetters.

He was then interrupted by Djafar, who turned his head to the staircase.

‘Mechuel, listen and bear it in mind.’

‘I am listening, and will bear it in mind,’ replied a hollow voice like an echo out of remote depths.

It made Fermal Bey's flesh creep. He reluctantly met Djafar's eyes, burning like two live embers out of the darkness. There was something at once thrilling and fascinating in the Bedouin's passionate longing to shape an uncertain future in accordance with his own wishes. On a sudden the Turk felt himself almost hostile towards him, and for one moment it seemed to him as if he were sharing the feelings, the thoughts, and the interests of the enemy. His uneasiness growing, he turned away and looked up at the stars.

‘The night is far spent,’ he said in curt dismissal.

‘Yes, it will soon be one with the past. Does it not gladden you that this hour is leading us nearer the goal?’

As Fermal Bey did not answer at once, Djafar began again.

‘Pray to Allah that he may darken the understanding of our enemies and cause the great war to break out among them.’

Directly after he stood up and was again the

attentive host with no other thought than to see to the comfort of his guest.

‘You are tired and would like to sleep. Forgive me for keeping you up.’

He went to the balustrade of the balcony and gazed up to the stars, that were fading out before the first faint grey of dawn. ‘Look, the sun is now rising. A new day is dawning. Perhaps it will be ours.’

Fermal Bey had likewise stood up. He felt a heavy weariness in every limb. At the same time he was irritable from the interminable interview, and his mind was a blank. He gazed down below.

The small town, if such the cluster of white buildings could be called, looked as unreal as a dream. In the twilight of the struggle between day and night every contour was blotted out. One house was merged in the next, the tiny gardens all blended together, and the thoroughfare winding through the hamlet was a dried-up river-bed.

The observer raised his head and looked to the east. His sight was lost in haze veiling the boundless distance. Grey ringed with grey, with a faint touch of blue on the undermost rim. And then all on a sudden a sparkling arose, as if the glow of some invisible fire had flung up to heaven a few sullen sparks. Directly after it was light. Somewhere or other the fire began to blaze. Like a fiery sword its rays clove darkness and mist, swept them away, blotting out what had been. The day broke.

‘As Sergeant Esjuk said, you came at a seasonable time,’ murmured Djafar’s voice in his ear. ‘I want to know what war is. There are many people down there who are longing for it to come for its own sake.’

‘And your father?’ asked Fermal Bey, absent-mindedly.

Djafar walked slowly across the balcony. At the doorway he stopped.

‘No one of the tribe of Ibn Hamkal was ever afraid of the fight. My father is a brave man and an honourable marabout. When he hears to-day that most of those present have a mind to fight, he will be of the same mind as themselves.’

‘So that is settled. You fill me with pride and gladness, Djafar Ibn Hamkal. The sons of the Prophet have both faith and confidence . . .’

Djafar interrupted him, saying with an unmistakable sneer :

‘The will of Allah is always to do what the Faithful wish, the reason being, I suppose, because they are really faithful to Him still. Farewell!’

He withdrew with the springy, supple gait which Fermal Bey had before admired.

The Turk shrugged his shoulders. This Bedouin, who was one day to inherit his father’s power and dignity, was unintelligible to him, but he saw clearly that it was to his own advantage to be on good terms with him. He lifted up his arms to heaven as if registering a vow.

All around everything was inundated with the light of the early day. In the street a few lean dogs were nosing in the refuse heaps. On its farther side, from behind the row of houses, a date-palm or two stood out against the light background. Then, on a sudden, there rang out from below the regular beat of a firm step.

‘Captain, captain!’ And Sergeant Esjuk came in

sight, holding a Bedouin youth confidentially by the arm. He had caught sight of his superior officer from afar, and was now hurrying towards him. 'My sister's eldest son. I have never seen him before. His liver is swelling with wrath against the Infidels.'

Fermal Bey glanced down at the sergeant and his companion, and then his eyes ranged once more over the countryside. The walls of the tiny houses, a moment ago so mean, shone a dazzling white, the palm-trees rocked softly in the morning breeze, the street was bathed in sunshine. His thoughts flew to the man with whom he had just conferred. If there were many more like him and the youth down there, the war was far from being lost.

The sergeant then raised his strong voice :

'The men of El Mur will follow us to a man. I have enlisted them. Their hearts are burning with the lust of battle.'

On the plain at the east end of the town a few thousand people were gathered together. The Bedouins in their white *burnous* stood stiff and impassive, the women and children sat round the head of the family, waiting patiently. Not a murmur until Sheikh Abdallah, with Mansur and his father-in-law the old Mabrouk es Serir, drew near, when a suppressed hum was heard. The fantasia would soon begin.

Sheikh Abdallah strode upright and proud through the crowd, which eagerly made room for him. When he reached the right-hand side of the oblong space, left open for the games, he stopped, Mansur taking a position on his left and Sheikh Mabrouk the place of

honour on his right. Fermal Bey came up in silence and remained standing by Mansur. The young bridegroom could scarcely hide his satisfaction. It was on his account that this festival was being held. Djafar's wedding four years before had passed off in the strictest privacy. Even if his father had not said a word, what plainer hint could be given than the comparison which was challenged by everything he saw. What if the inheritance should one day be divided. . . .

From the short northern side of the grounds came a muffled roll of drums, resembling a low rumbling and scorning all semblance of time.

The spectators craned their necks and looked to the north.

The roll growing louder and louder culminated in an impassioned flourish which fired the blood, whereupon it slowly decreased in volume again. When it had died down to its former monotonous rumble, a motley procession hove in sight and wended its way towards the centre of the quadrangle.

First came a small, squat man carrying a tremendous drum on a strap round his neck. With two wooden drumsticks which he held in the middle, he kept on belabouring both sides of the big drum. The result was a roll that never ceased, sometimes sinking to a plaintive moan, sometimes rising to a frenzied roar, only to slacken down again to a hollow and monotonous growl. Behind the big drum came four men, each with a smaller one. Each held his drum pressed against his body with the left arm, while his right fist beat unceasingly on the tight skin of the side turned uppermost. Off and on, the blows would rain thick and fast, whereupon they would fall more

gently and with long pauses in between. Every now and then, too, the four men would scratch the skin with their nails, and when that happened a nerve-racking sensation would creep over the spectators. Behind the drummers came a lank Soudanese, who made as much din with a small tambourine as all the others put together.

With swift, jerky steps the band drew nearer.

When it was within ten paces of the two sheikhs, Zared, the man with the big drum, turned his first somersault. Thenceforward one somersault followed the other in an unbroken series, without his ever ceasing even for a single second to belabour the sides of his drum. Clouds of dust whirled round him, the sweat ran down his swarthy countenance, but still he revolved tirelessly round the gigantic drum, while the four men behind him pommelled the taut skin of their tom-toms with their fists; the blows pattered down like a shower of hail, and the uproar increased to a frantic delirium.

The Soudanese smiled blissfully over the din that he and his companions were making. The tambourine crashed against his forehead, against his left elbow, against his knee-caps, and with it all the knuckles of his left hand found time to add to the pandemonium.

There was something in this irregular music which was at once stimulating and depressing. The listeners, particularly the women and children, laughed out loud with delight, while the men's bearing grew prouder. Their eyes sparkled and their lips shot up at the corners. Zared, the drummer of the tribe of Beni Hamka, was famous far and wide for his skill, but to-day he excelled himself.

The old Sheikh Mabrouk turned to his neighbour with an appreciative smile. But Sheikh Abdallah neither stirred nor noticed it. His eyes lost their way in unbounded distances ; he was deaf to the noise that raged around him.

The musicians had passed by the sheikhs, then the drumming slackened. Soon the sound changed to a monotonous murmur which, as soon as the hearers had got used to it, produced but a soporific effect. Fermal Bey, who had been present at a fantasia on a former occasion, found comfort in these subdued and muffled tones after the almost volcanic outbreak shortly before. Only the Soudanese laughed and showed his white teeth. Over and over again he hurled up his tambourine into the air, caught it, struck a few light blows against his elbow and then flung it up anew.

A short interval followed. The spectators exchanged meaning glances ; the introduction was promising. Thereupon a few camels were discovered on the slope behind the standing-place of the more distinguished guests. The largest and finest of these ships of the desert bore a canopy of motley colours. Under cover of its gold-embroidered draperies the bride as a matter of course, and presumably the bridegroom's mother as well, were looking on at the entertainment. A Bedouin woman, moreover, was telling another, she had heard that Risja, the bride, was a marvel of beauty and grace.

'She has just turned fourteen,' added the woman.

Mansur, who had perceived the arrival of the camels, forced his way through the crowd of sightseers and stopped by the magnificent canopy.

‘Lalla Djilana,’ he softly cried up to the carefully closed draperies, ‘art thou there?’

‘My son,’ answered his mother’s voice in the same low tone.

‘And the young gazelle is waiting at thy side?’ continued Mansur. ‘Tell her, my heart is a flaming fire. My lips are thirsting for hers, my eyes . . .’

‘She will be thine this evening,’ broke in his mother in undertones. ‘When the sun sinks behind the town, the yearning of thy eyes will be quieted.’

‘It is half a day from now to evening, and my heart is burning in my breast like a fiery ember.’

Not a word came in reply, but a light-brown hand, tiny as a child’s, parted the curtains of the canopy and with wide-spread fingers waved a greeting to her love-sick bridegroom.

Mansur gazed at the hand as if bewitched. Up till then that was all he had seen of his wife. The five slender fingers, that opened themselves out to him in welcome, told him no doubt that there were still another five hours till evening, but afterwards . . .

‘Oh, Lalla,’ whispered Mansur in bliss, ‘kiss Risja for thy son, her husband.’ He looked up to the canopy as if spellbound. All was still behind the folds, the tiny hand had vanished again. When Mansur looked round him in bewilderment, it was to meet only the reproachful and astonished eyes of the camel driver. Mansur gave a quiet smile and returned to his place by his father. Not a feature of the latter betrayed whether he had noticed his son’s absence or not. On the other hand, it seemed to Fermal Bey, who was watching everything attentively, as though Sheikh Mabrouk shook his head reprovingly.

The drums, which had kept silent for a time, now boomed out again. A numerous cavalcade that had assembled on the south side of the open ground thundered past. The white *burnous* and the long gaily coloured saddle-cloths fluttered in the wind. A few gun-shots went off with a bang ; now and then a cry of applause was raised. The next moment the riders were past. They had swept by like a hurricane, and had stirred up clouds of dust. Even before they were gone, and the course was again clear, there followed in their tracks a band of armed foot. Two hundred strong, they marched in a compact mob, without the slightest notion of soldierly bearing or of keeping step. But the rifles which they carried in their hands, on their shoulders or slung round their necks, were all of modern make, and their cartridge-belts seemed to be well filled. Chattering and talking, the men walked along over the playground, waved their weapons when they found themselves in front of Sheikh Abdallah, yelled out a few hoarse cheers, far more like clamorous demands than expressions of approval and affection, and then passed on.

Sheikh Abdallah's face lost its far-away expression, and a suggestion of a smile curled his lips. He had happened upon an opportunity of giving old Mabrouk and the Turkish officer a proof that the tribe controlled a force which the prudent man would be wise to include in his reckoning. He reared himself up to his lofty stature and, somewhat condescendingly, whispered a compliment in the ear of his right-hand neighbour.

' Who has not heard of the Beni Hamka ? ' replied old Mabrouk. ' Even the sand whispers the name of the tribe, and the palm-trees for many miles around

know not another. My daughter will win great happiness.' He breathed a sigh and continued in a scarcely audible undertone. 'For, of course, it is settled that your youngest son Mansur shall become sheikh and marabout after you?'

Not a feature changed in Sheikh Abdallah's face. He spoke low, without so much as turning his head.

'God's will is done in all things. My resolution is taken in the night of Fate.'

Sheikh Mabrouk understood that he would get no plainer hint. He was an ignorant man, little versed in the Koran, who had forced his way up step by step to his position of authority, thanks to his wealth alone. But he knew for all this, that all resolutions taken in the night of Fate remain imperturbably fixed. Was there not a hint of this in the very hour? In the night of Fate the Koran was sent down from God's throne into the lowest heaven. After which, the archangel Gabriel brought the holy book to Mohammed, and revealed the first part to him. Sheikh Mabrouk smiled slyly when he recalled the pious tradition. He had made good provision for his youngest daughter's future.

Sheikh Abdallah had grown an inch by the time he had shown the numerous gathering that the Beni Hamka tribe could put four hundred well-equipped horsemen in the field, as well as half that number of foot-soldiers. He glanced behind him on the sly to where the men of El Mur were standing shoulder to shoulder. Visibly impressed, their veterans with their heads together were talking in an eager whisper..

Again the drums resounded. It was the signal for the races.

A troop of horsemen rushed into the open place ; at their very heels came a second, to be overtaken in their turn by other mounted companies in uninterrupted succession. The horses were stretched out like belts along the ground, the riders sat huddled up in the saddle, so as to impede as little as possible the movements of their steed. Every now and then a lonely rider would be seen tearing along the course as if shot from a gun. Next moment at least twenty others would race after him as hard as they could go. There ensued an indescribable medley : horses' legs stretched to their fullest extent, a mass of human limbs all bobbing up and down or wildly gesticulating, fluttering garments and weapons blazing like lightning, all seemed entangled together.

Fermal Bey in vain endeavoured to decide which of the riders rode the best or which of the horses went the fastest. But Mansur, beside him, acclaimed his favourite every now and then, and the old Sheikh Mabrouk, who had a sure eye where horseflesh was concerned, would nod his head approvingly from time to time.

In the very middle of a race the contest was, as it seemed, interrupted by a single horseman who made straight for the two sheikhs at full speed. When directly in front of them he pulled up with such violence that he forced his horse on its haunches. For a second or two the animal stood bolt upright, trembling in every limb, while its rider lay close on its neck, which quivered like the rippling of a wave.

'Djafar,' thought Fermal Bey, scanning the rider's bronzed face. It wore a furious expression, and through the half-closed lids the black eyes smouldered

with hatred. The Turk saw that something would happen.

At a call from Djafar, the thoroughbred, seeming scarcely to skim the ground, flew far out on the course, and then, wheeling round on itself while still in its stride, came rushing back again like the wind.

And this time Djafar swung a sword above his head. The cuts fell to right and left. The strength of his arm seemed to grow ten times stronger; the swiftness wherewith the blows and thrusts were dealt was past belief. The blade flashed round the rider's head like the rays of a halo. There was something miraculous, all but terrifying, in this scene. Backwards and forwards flashed the lightly built thoroughbred over the course, never for a moment flagging in its pace, a countless number of times. Suddenly Djafar snatched a revolver from his belt with his bridle-hand, and, raising the weapon in the air, fired shot after shot. The blade still swished with unabated rapidity; like a gleaming white sun it encircled him, while shot followed shot in quick succession, and the horse, like a gigantic bird on invisible wings, flew over the sand. The horseman held the reins in his mouth.

On the south side of the racecourse Zared began beating the big drum. The rest of the musicians joined in at once.

Djafar's silver-grey steed raced once more up to the sheikhs. Horse and man were one, and the blade, everywhere at once, clothed them both in an armour of steel. The shots still cracked unceasingly. As soon as one revolver was empty it was flung on the ground, and a second quickly followed it. But Djafar

had already taken a third out of the well-stocked arsenal in his belt.

The racer swept past the sheikhs, and again it took in its stride the breakneck turn about, which might cost horse and rider their lives.

All went well, and back careered Djafar amid a hurricane of reports, sword-cuts, cheers, and frantic puffing and blowing.

The spectators crowded instinctively nearer. The men of El Mur roared in unmistakable applause. A few women uttered shrill cries of terror. The drums boomed out louder than ever, the tambourine buzzed to a volley of blows.

And this time Djafar stopped in front of the sheikhs. He flung back his head, whereupon the silver-grey at once reared up on its haunches. Bending backwards, in an almost horizontal position, Djafar emptied his fourth revolver, while the sword still flashed like lightning under the horse and about its head and tail.

The men of El Mur clean forgot their host's high rank. A few gave the signal to cheer, and then all the others joined in. And from then onwards there spread round the whole circle a roar which grew ever louder and more tempestuous. This last feat was something more than mere skill in horsemanship or dexterity in the use of arms ; it showed a contempt of death which far surpassed anything that was usually seen in such performances. But cries of warning were raised as well.

' The horse will tumble backwards ! Allah, preserve the foolhardy fellow ! '

The steed pawed the air. Djafar, deaf and blind

to all else, forced it into a crazy dance on its hind-legs. Not until he had fired the last shot and flung the fourth revolver away, did he allow the silver-grey to stand on all fours. Whereupon, away it sped again. But this time the sword was put aside. Instead, Djafar threw himself across his horse's side, and at full gallop picked up the first revolver. The three others were recovered in the same way. Djafar dangled now over the left side, now over the right. His skilled hand never made a mistake; his quick eye always judged the distance correctly. The ride was kept up at the same giddy pace, and the last wheel about was as forcibly done as the first.

When the horse stood once more in front of the sheikhs, Djafar leaned forward as if he wanted to whisper something in its ear. Then and there, before anyone could explain how it had come about, the silver-grey, as if struck by a bullet, had fallen down and lay sprawling on the ground. But Djafar stood uninjured near it. There he towered—after he had taken a leap in the nick of time, straight as a lance, with the reins in his bridle-hand.

The spectators gave a sigh of relief, and from the row of tribesmen of El Mur there rang out a voice full of admiration:

‘All hail, son of the desert! With our eyes we have seen you can lead men to war.’

Djafar bowed before the sheikhs, as if it were in their honour alone that he had given the display of horsemanship. After which, he dropped the reins and went quietly to his father's side. He stood by Fermal Bey, who felt himself bound to say a few words in appreciation.

‘ I have seen many daring exploits, but . . . ’

‘ Away ! ’ cried Djafar, without listening to him.

The silver-grey, that had lain as if dead, jumped on its legs, gave itself a shake, and then trotted cheerfully off the scene of its master’s triumph and its own. Mechuel took it in charge on the cross-side of the course.

Fermal Bey would have repeated his compliments, but Djafar interrupted him.

‘ They are now hankering more than ever for the fight,’ he whispered.

At that the Turkish officer became serious. He had secretly wondered whether Djafar had not had some other motive than merely to show off his mastery on horseback. He stooped forward and shot a curious glance at Sheikh Abdallah. His host’s impassive features revealed nothing ; but Mansur seemed to be dissatisfied. He was whispering eagerly with his rear-rank man, and looked as if he had been ordering him to fetch him a horse. When the man declined, he asked Sheikh Abdallah, and received a curt refusal. Mansur then moved round and gazed helplessly over to the canopy on the slope of the hill.

Straightway the voice again rang out that had a while ago greeted Djafar.

‘ Why,’ came the sneering cry, ‘ has the sheikh not another son ? ’

Mansur turned again to his father, his face consumed with anger. Sheikh Abdallah smiled loftily, and merely said :

‘ The abduction of the bride ! ’

That was the next item on the programme. It forms part of every Arabian fantasia, and represents

how a bride is captured on her journey to the expectant bridegroom.

And immediately after the drums began to beat again, and a couple of camels sailed into the open ground with a rolling gait. At least twenty men on horseback served as their escort. The bearing of these horsemen indicated that they scented some danger, or perhaps some sudden attack. And, see, they had not been mistaken. From the opposite direction there came galloping towards them a band of twice their numbers. One and all levelled the muzzles of their rifles straight at the desert travellers; and their leader, in a rough voice, called upon them to deliver into their hands the young bride in the canopied litter on the first camel. But Arab chivalry forbade the mere thought of such a thing; consequently a fight was inevitable. The assailants rushed forward in a semicircle. Their battle-cry was raised, and their guns were fired in the air or else into the ground. The defenders rallied round the camels and paid the aggressors back in the same coin. For one minute the scene was an inextricable hurly-burly of horses lashing out with their heels, and riders splitting the air with swords that glistened like silver, and threatening muzzles pointing in every direction. The white *burnous*, all awaving, folded themselves round arms and legs insanely fighting; and, high above the combatants, rose the canopy, bespangled with gold and purple-coloured, which rocked up and down in the storm like some overgrown and magnificent flower. The tumult waxed fiercer. The assailants pressed ever closer on the camels, that grew restive and set up an ear-piercing squeal. The battle-cries were

raised to a wilder shout, the guns banged uninterruptedly. All on a sudden a horseman or two shook themselves free from the living skein and rode off in headlong flight. The assailants gave a shout of triumph. The defenders, frightened out of their wits, pulled their horses round and scattered whence they came. The camels were surrounded, the curtains of the canopy torn aside ; a veiled woman stood in the opening, arrayed in a silken garment embroidered in gold that glistened in the sunshine. A moment she stood where she was, framed in the purple sheen of the canopy ; then she slid lightly down the camel's side, and was caught up by a stately horseman in a turban, who set her across his saddle-bow and, giving his horse its head, was off and away with his booty. But the captured bride coiled her brown arms round the victor's neck and nestled trustfully to his breast. It was clear to all that this was the right man, the one in whose arms she had longed to be. A shout of joy thundered and volleyed, and the band of horsemen tore after their leader and his conquered bride in wild career. The well-trained camels, that at other times had taken part in such spectacles, swayed along in the rear at their own sweet will.

The spectators, who had followed the scene with breathless interest, gave vent to their delight in loud cheering. Their enthusiasm had been aroused as much by the wasteful expenditure of ammunition as by the splendour of the dresses and the histrionic talent of the actors. But soon all was still again in the densely packed lines. All looked forward with intense excitement to the tournament which was now to come.

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But instead of giving the signal for this, Sheikh Abdallah took a few steps forward into the lists.

‘Sons of the desert!’ he cried in a voice so loud as to command instant attention. ‘You all know what has come to pass in these days. The Unbelievers, blinded with their presumption and with a contemptible greed, have sailed over the seas. They have taken possession of the town of Tripoli and declared the whole country to be their property. Who are they? I, too, have inquired about that. An answer I have never heard. We only know that some misguided heretics—may the plague overtake them!—have taken up their abode on the coast. And since they are persisting in their obstinacy and intend to remain in the country, there is nothing further left for us to do than to hurl them back into the sea. The battle, which we have now fought out in jest, will be seen within a few days before the gates of Tripoli.’

Even after the opening sentences there had been some applause here and there. But when the sheikh reached this point in his discourse, swords and rifles were stretched up out of the crowd of spectators, and a multitudinous outcry rang wild and piercing over the festival grounds.

‘Beni Hamka! Allah akbar! Beni Hamka! Allah akbar!’ It was the women who shouted the loudest and most vehemently, saying:

‘May Allah give you strength to wipe them out! God is great! Allah akbar!’

‘The end of the Beni Hamka fantasia will be fought out with drawn swords,’ continued the sheikh, as soon as the sudden uproar had as suddenly died down. ‘When the chargers of the clan have borne our horse-

men across the desert, they will trample the Infidels to dust.' Sheikh Abdallah stooped down and picked up a handful of sand, which he let trickle through his fingers. 'See! thus will the children of the Prophet do unto the intruders. May their fate be a warning to all!' The speaker swept his eyes round the circle, which had closed into a mass so dense that there was no elbow-room left. 'To-morrow at daybreak the warriors of the Beni Hamka march off. May Allah watch over their footsteps.' With a bend of his neck, Sheikh Abdallah would have retired. He knew his men's minds and he relied on them, after he had made known his will.

He had not underrated their fighting mood. The anger which had smouldered so long in their hearts flamed up suddenly. Cries of 'Allah,' mingled with curses on the Unbelievers, thundered like a hurricane over the pleasure-ground.

Sheikh Abdallah smiled to right and left. Even if he had not raised the storm, he had at least directed its course.

'We shall lead you on to victory through the battle—I and my son . . . Mansur.' And, as if it were a detail of no consequence, he added: 'Djafar, who has required far too much of himself and his horse already, will stay at home.' With another bend of his head, the sheikh stepped with dignified mien out of the circle, which made way for him.

Fermal Bey, who had stood behind the sheikh wedged in the crowd, looked around him. That Djafar was to remain at home, depressed him. He had formed a clear idea already as to the intrigues and countershifts in the tribe of the Beni Hamka. He was in no way deceived by the peace and quietness

which reigned only on the surface. He divined the violent passions beneath; he noted the dissension. The sheikh was held in high regard, but was not popular. As for Mansur—Fermal Bey dismissed him with a shrug: a weak youth, easily led. Djafar, on the other hand, had enormous influence over his Bedouins: he was a born leader. And this was the man whom, by hook or by crook, they would oust from his position. . . . The Turk scowled after Sheikh Abdallah.

The sight of the camels, from whose canopies the ladies had witnessed the fantasia, turned his thoughts in a new direction. Behind the curtains Mansur's mother was concealed. She had long since supplanted a favoured rival, and now she was plotting to disinherit the son. The Turk paused to wish that Arab ceremonial had been less rigid: had at least allowed him to hear that woman's voice. But such a thing was inconceivable. He would never learn anything of this creature who, in the semi-darkness of a harem, twisted the threads of such intrigues and set men's minds in motion. Presumably it was she who had confirmed Sheikh Abdallah in his resolution. And when husband and son came back famous from the war, Djafar, who had borne no part in it, would be forgotten by his supporters. A simple matter, surely. . . . Fermal Bey again shrugged his shoulders. In any case, he had succeeded in his mission. In his mind's eye he saw a host of mounted warriors in their white robes rushing like the wind to the coast. From the outermost limits of the wilderness they rode along at full gallop and formed an impassable circle round the invaders. First came the sturdy, untiring Berbers; next the stately Bedouins with their courage and contempt

of death; and last, the Tuaregs and the Soudanese. Thirsting for revenge, ablaze with anger, they were all driven northwards as by some irresistible force. . . . Yes, his mission had been successful.

Fermal Bey tore himself from his musings and made haste to overtake the two sheikhs, who were wending their way slowly and with dignity to the town.

'I thank you in the name of my country,' he began with eager warmth.

'Eh . . . what do you say?' said Sheikh Abdallah, looking at him in astonishment.

'In the name of the Prophet,' amended Fermal Bey. He had mentioned an unknown term. The European at once saw his mistake, and smiled politely.

Sheikh Abdallah gave an almost imperceptible bow of the head and walked quietly on. The Turk took the hint and stayed behind.

Nearly half of the spectators were encamped on the festival grounds. Little groups of people were standing about and talking in hushed voices and with subdued gestures. Plainly enough, something had aroused their indignation and left them undecided. Fermal Bey, put out of temper, wondered whether all of them would really start next day.

A little way ahead the camels were swaying along to the town. Mansur was walking alongside the first and . . . Could his eyes be deceiving him? No; keeping in step with him at his side was Djafar, who, to judge from his behaviour and bearing, was bubbling over with friendliness. Mansur, on the other hand, stiffly kept his distance, openly nursing a grievance.

Fermal Bey bit his lip with vexation. His anxiety awoke. Anything that led him to suppose that it

might have a disturbing effect on to-morrow's march off irritated him. He looked round inquiringly. Yes ; the air was plainly charged with electricity.

And with the thought came the explosion. The curtains of the canopy, shielding the ladies from inquisitive eyes, opened ever so slightly, and a clenched fist reached down towards the brothers. A deluge of angry words burst from a pair of woman's lips. Mansur, too, said something in the same angry tones.

Djafar stopped. He looked up at the hand and then down at his brother's face. After which he salaamed humbly, and stood still with his eyes fixed on the ground.

All those round about pulled up. Curiosity, rage, or contempt cried out in the eyes of all. A moment after, the voice from within the canopy was hushed, the hand vanished, and the camel stole on. Mansur walked alongside ; but now he was as good as alone. Not only Djafar, but everyone else had remained behind ; it was a silent but forcible demonstration. The tribe had thrown in their lot with Djafar against Mansur and his mother. All eyes were turned on the two sheikhs.

Nothing showed that Sheikh Abdallah had noticed anything. He strode on, calm and aloof. But the old Sheikh Mabrouk shook his head. He turned to his companion and saw the anger smouldering at the back of his eyes.

Sheikh Mabrouk had an idea that the wedding-festival would end with a scene in Abdallah's harem. The secrets of the ladies' quarters are never divulged ; but he supposed that recourse would be had to the switch or, perhaps, even to the whip. A woman who

makes her husband look ridiculous in public richly deserves such treatment. The old man hoped that his daughter would behave herself more prudently when her husband became head of the tribe.

Pompously, and in silence, the two sheikhs turned into the main street of the town. The murmur in their rear grew louder. The Bedouins of El Mur shouted at the top of their voices that they would follow no one but Djafar. The neighbouring tribe of Ufana applauded vociferously. Their discontent, like the ripples which fret the face of the water when a stone is thrown in, spread to the rest of the gathering. The Bedouins from the north chimed in with them. That greater or smaller bands of each tribe should go up against the Unbelievers on the coast, was settled once for all. But whether they acknowledged Sheikh Abdallah's green flag, was far from being decided. No ; merely because the Beni Hamka clan was the wealthiest and most numerous in that part of the country, was that a reason why the rest of them should submit themselves to his dictatorship ?

The words flew from lip to lip. What had Ibn Hamkal's family squabbles to do with them ? Give them Djafar, or any other sheikh whatever, but not Abdallah, nor that old skin-flint Mabrouk.

' El Mur ! El Mur ! ' yelled the men from the oasis on the outskirts of the wilderness.

' Derdj ! ' was the haughty counter-cry from a few men from the north, and others re-echoed their claim. Their sheikh was young. Why had he not come to this wedding ? They said he, too, had asked for the hand of Sheikh Mabrouk's daughter in marriage. Sheikh Abdallah's son, on certain conditions, had

been preferred. . . . Bah ! that was tittle-tattle ; was it becoming for men to bother their heads about such matters ? ‘Derdj ! Derdj !’ If the men from the south had a mind to follow them, they were welcome.

‘El Mur ! El Mur !’ was the defiant cry from a few hundred throats.

Thus two parties were formed, with a sharp dividing line between them.

‘El Mur ! El Mur !’

‘Derdj ! Derdj !’

On the slope of the hill stood Fermal Bey with clenched teeth. The report which he had mapped out in his mind began fairly enough, but the sequel seemed likely to be anything but promising. This mean jealousy and incessant wrangling over quite incidental privileges were the ruination of all business. He scowled sullenly round him. Down below stood Sergeant Esjuk among the Bedouins of El Mur. And he, who of all people should have had more sense, was shouting loudest of all the name of his tribe. But was there really no leader—not one—who could combine the different elements and unite the contending minds ? Perplexed, he averted his eyes from the crowds on the plain and saw Djafar. He was still standing in the same humble attitude, his arms hanging limp at his sides.

‘He is playing his part all right,’ thought the Turk bitterly ; ‘but it is dissimulation, for all that.’

A man approached from the town, walking very fast. Fermal Bey recognised the one-eyed renegade. What was to happen next ?

Mechuel stopped in front of his master, who uttered a word or two.

The servant salaamed and went on his way to the

plain. He mixed in the crowd, and wherever he went he dropped a few words, which were repeated and then re-echoed from lip to lip. The effect of the words was wonderful. They acted like a charm, subduing the rebellious minds, quieting the unrest, uniting all hearts. The outcries were hushed, the different groups intermingled. All party strife was over. Eyes, that had been blazing with hatred, met one another with understanding ; and hands, which shortly before had been feeling for their swords, dropped peacefully to their sides.

‘ Beni Hamka ! ’ cried a mighty voice, and forthwith all shouted with one accord : ‘ Beni Hamka ! Beni Hamka ! ’ And in the very middle of the crowd Sergeant Esjuk flung up his arms to heaven and joined in with the others.

Fermal Bey looked back at the man who had worked this miracle through his messenger. Over there in front walked Djafar Ibn Hamkal with his wiry stride. He was making for the town. He was too far away to call to him. No matter, it only meant he would learn the tenor of the greeting a little later.

When Fermal Bey turned into the main street of the town, he was struck by the unusual bustle. Everywhere resounded the loud voices of women, the shrill cries of children ; and, before the armourer’s workshop, a long line of men were waiting. A fantasia, ending with a fight against the Infidels with drawn swords, was a thing that had never been seen before. Who but Sheikh Abdallah could have conceived the daring thought ? Who but the men of the Beni Hamka were capable of turning it into action ? Their victory would

ring through the centuries in songs and in traditions ; their children and their children's children, down to the fifth and the sixth generations, would listen with shining eyes to the ballads on the rude reality of this wonderful fantasia !

Fermal Bey walked thoughtfully along the street. At headquarters it would be put down to his credit that this immense wave of humanity rolled to the coast. He was contented, and longed for the morning to come.

In Sheikh Abdallah's house all was ablaze with lights, although it was not yet dark. The bridegroom's father meant to show by this that he gave no thought to the cost, more especially because the festivities were being cut short on account of the march off next day. The guests sat round the small courtyard or in the adjoining rooms. No one spoke a word. Not a sound was heard but the jingling of the coffee-cups. All these men observed a dignified deliberation : they even avoided looking at one another.

In the twilight came Mansur, heralded by the rattling of the tambourines in front of the house. He had been praying in the mosque, and a faint smell of incense still clung to his clothes. A few boys led the way, carrying five candles in a candelabrum all burning brightly in the still air. Mansur followed the lights with overwrought eyes : their clear, steady flame betokened a happy marriage.

The curious, who had followed him home, babbled incessantly with one another to the accompaniment of the tambourines.

When Mansur stepped into the courtyard he was

greeted from the upper story of the house by a shrill, long-sustained cry of joy :

‘ Ih . . . ih . . . ije . . . ije . . . ih ! ’

It came from the womenfolk. Even if no strange man ever had the right to see them, they were yet allowed to gaze upon the men from a distance. And so now, as prescribed by custom, they were welcoming the bridegroom from behind their tiny latticed windows. For a while they filled the whole house with their twittering ; outside rattled the tambourines. The guests smiled out of politeness ; but no one stirred, no one said a word. Respect for Sheikh Abdallah demanded that nobody, even in his most secret thoughts, should steal a glance to where his wives abode.

With swift steps Mansur hurried past the chamber to which his father had retired. As in a dream, the bridegroom saw his stern features glide by and vanish out of sight. Not so much as an eyelid had moved—why was that ? He loved him ; to his second son he would surely bequeath the green turban—the emblem of his holiness and power. Everything on that memorable day promised him that. And ; at his feet, sat Mabrouk who, for his daughter’s sake as well, perhaps ; as for his own, shared his hopes. Yet not an eyelid . . . Oh, that was not of any consequence—the bride was awaiting his coming ! . . . The bride . . .

At a staircase the candle-bearers stopped. One of them pointed, beaming to the flames : all were burning brightly and diffusing a pleasant fragrance. Mansur responded to the lad’s smile and then bounded upstairs. The bride was waiting . . .

The guests were sitting in impassive silence as

before. The 'Ih-ije' cry subsided as soon as Mansur passed out of sight. The tambourines in the street beat a farewell. Outside the darkness deepened and the stars brightened.

With a hand trembling with over-excitement, Mansur tapped on the door before which he stood. As the custom required, he waited until it was opened from within.

He saw before him a great hall ; candles and lamps were burning everywhere. A hand reached out for him, and he heard his mother's voice, saying :

' Come ! '

From the adjoining rooms came a whisper of voices, muffled and excited, and the rustle of silk dresses. For all of the lady-guests had just taken to flight at the entrance of a man. But their eyes blazed from behind their veils and followed the bridegroom's every movement.

Mansur saw nothing ; he heard nothing. His eyes hung on the closed door immediately in front of him.

' Oh, Lalla ! . . . Lalla ! ' he breathed, excited.

Close beside his ear came his mother's reply, low but impressive :

' Never forget who gave thee life ! May Allah—praised be his name for ever and ever !—guide thy footsteps ! ' And his mother opened the door, pushed her son into the room and softly closed the door behind him.

Mansur took a step forward ; then stopped and looked straight on inquiringly.

On a gilt chair in the background of the room sat the bride. Decked out in the utmost finery and laden

with jewels, she waited for her husband. Her face was smeared all over with a thick coat of paint and powder, but nothing could spoil the exceeding delicacy of the features. And below the pencilled brows the eyes beamed out, large, brilliant, and tender. A timid life lay within them, and the desire to please, and a bashful question.

Mansur bowed low his head.

‘Thou, my wife, in this life and in the next, I greet thee.’

‘Thy handmaid, that is of less account than the dust beneath thy feet, bids thee welcome!’ breathed the bride’s voice, with a slight tremble.

Mansur smiled happily, and for the first time ventured to behold his wife, who had of late engrossed his every thought and feeling. Risja, despite her youth, was very plump. He had never for a moment expected anything else, to be sure, since it was his mother who had selected the bride; but he was not the less delighted on that account. His enraptured eyes rested a second on the arch so soft and so white peeping out of green slippers embroidered with gold. With a bashful look that seemed almost to beg permission, he strayed up and up to the youthful, voluptuous figure in the rich bridal array. He saw a pair of loose, blue trousers, a silver-embroidered waistcoat of dull-green silk, an orange-coloured blouse, and a tiny head-dress red as a poppy, that nodded like a flower in the great coils of blue-black hair adorned with pearls. And out of this maze of colour and embroidery a pair of tender eyes, soft as velvet, gave him greeting, and he could hear the silk rustle with the beats of an anxious heart.

For one instant Mansur never moved, giddy as he was and almost trembling with happiness. At the next he flew so fast to his bride that his marriage robes fluttered.

‘Oh, thou Desire of my soul, Light of my heart, thou Dream of my dreams! . . .’

He threw himself down before Risja, and caught hold of her veil and pressed it to his eager lips. He dared not so much as to touch the bride herself without her sanction.

‘Who am I that thou shouldst praise me? Thy bond-maiden, no more.’

‘Then I become the bondsman of my bondmaid, and desire nothing better.’

Mansur raised his eyes from her foot to her hand.

‘Thine arms are soft as the mountain snow. Praised be Allah, who hath sent down a *houri* upon earth!’

‘My lord and master!’ The bride’s voice trembled. Bashfully she stroked his hair with her tiny brown hand; hesitatingly, as who should say: ‘Dare I do it?’

‘Thy hand is cool and yet warm; lay it on my brow. Good thoughts and sweet dreams will then come to me from thee.’ He seized her hand, and kissed it again and again.

‘I thank thee, lord. Thou art gentle as a dove and strong as a lion.’

Mansur stood up. Risja also rose. For a while both remained silent. Their hearts were overflowing, their lips trembled.

There came a knock at the door, and they heard the mother’s voice saying:

‘ The wedding cup ! ’

Mansur ran to the door, through which a small tray was handed to him. He took the cup carefully, for it was full to the brim, and it was most important that not a drop should be spilt. No ; although his hands trembled, all went well. A thoughtful mother had left a margin. Without taking his eyes off the bride Mansur drank a draught. Afterwards Risja took a sip.

‘ Now we have shown that for us two everything is one. Whatever life bestows on me is thine as well, Risja.’

The bride came slowly towards him.

‘ My lord and husband, if I have the privilege of seeing thee every day that Allah gives me, there is nothing left for me to wish.’

Mansur knit his brows in thought. Something or other was implied in the words, but what ? Oh yes, the battle in store for the morrow.

‘ Risja, my wife, look at me ! ’

She turned to him, and her eyes said they liked doing that best of all.

‘ Thou art the bride of a warrior. One day I am to be the head of a mighty tribe and to become a marabout. I have duties. And Allah—may he be praised for giving me, through thee, the joys of the seven heavens—also demands that I fulfil them.’

Risja bowed her head. She realised the duty, and raised no further objections.

‘ I promise thee to return soon.’ Mansur took her hand. ‘ Cool as snow, soft as silk, but yet strong as steel ! Praised be the Lord of the heaven and of the earth, for thy sake ! ’

‘Oh, captain, thou art making my heart sick with blissfulness.’

‘And mine is burning like a flaming fire, which the light of thine eyes hath kindled.’

She looked up in his face with yearning. Their lips moved, but they could not utter the words that their feelings engendered. She moved restlessly from one foot to the other. On a sudden she took one step forward and then another and stood close beside him.

He raised his arms, and his hands lightly touched her shoulders. A trembling shook her from head to foot, her eyes grew moist and gazed up to the man in meek triumph. Cautiously, as though she were a butterfly from whose wings he would not have brushed the sheen for the world, he drew her to his heart. For a moment—perhaps for two—she nestled there. Then, very gently, he drew himself away. The splendour of her wedding attire was uncrumpled; the gold dust on the butterfly’s wings unspoiled. Their sight was drowned in each other’s eyes; two sighs burst together from their breasts.

Mansur was the first to throw off the enchantment. It ill became a man from Ibn Hamkal’s famous clan to force himself on the wife who had been chosen for him. She must have time to get used to the sight of him. She must give herself to him of her own free will and in perfect confidence. He meant to wait . . .

Once more their eyes sought and found each other.

‘I have seen thee!’ he cried, intoxicated with happiness. Then he wheeled round and strode to the door.

She gazed after him with eyes wide and questioning until he had disappeared. Her head drooped to her breast. For a moment she stood very still, buried in her thoughts ; then she glided to the gilded chair and sat down. Her arms dropped to her sides ; her eyes glistened through the half-closed lids. Everything about her gleamed and sparkled on dress and hair : the precious stones emitted many-coloured flashes in the glimmering candlelight ; the silk fell in soft folds about the youthful figure, and the young bride sat alone in her gaudy splendour.

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The banquet was spread in the courtyard on low tables. The invited guests sat stiff and pompously, and fell to with their fingers. Mansur slipped quietly past the tall turbans and white *burnous*. He was in search of solitude, and felt glad that no one turned round to look at him. He came upon a dark staircase, ran softly up, and stepped on to a small terrace.

A solitary man was leaning over the balustrade. He turned quickly round and said in a low voice :

‘ Is that you, Mansur ? I wish you happiness.’

The bridegroom’s face was consumed with anger ; fortunately that could not be seen in the darkness. Of all people, the man he least wished to see was the Turk, who was the cause that the wedding festivities were being broken off. Mansur clenched his fists as he thought how much this visit had cost him. On a sudden, however, a passionate lust of battle laid hold of him, his heart thumped with joy, and he said in a friendly voice :

‘To-morrow!’

Fermal Bey nodded.

‘We will break the ranks of the Unbelievers as with thunderbolts, and our horses shall crush their bodies underfoot.’

‘You do not seem to know what a modern battle is like.’

‘Bah! I am sorry for their ignorance. May they turn to dust and ashes.’ Mansur shrugged his shoulders, adding: ‘Within a week I shall be here again.’

‘I trust you may.’

‘I mean to be. I say, I mean to be.’

It was now Fermal Bey that shrugged his shoulders. To attempt to give all these hotheads any idea of the technique of war was purposeless indeed; there was nothing else to do but to let them find out in practice what it really was. Besides, he had other things to think of than of this young fellow, who, probably, rhapsodised mostly of love and kisses. Had he not just learnt from Sergeant Esjuk the tenor of the message which had been sent to the noisy Bedouins by Djafar, the seeker and vigorous man of action: ‘Meet me next week in front of Tripoli.’ That was all that the man with the one eye had had to say. But it was enough. Fermal Bey, who had been unceasingly wavering between hope and fear, felt quiet in his mind at last; he had carried his commission to a successful conclusion. Many people would follow Sheikh Abdallah to the north; the rest would place themselves under Djafar’s leadership. The Turk had an inkling that beneath the surface an envenomed struggle was being waged between father and son. Which of the

two won the day, he did not care. The cause to which he had devoted his energies would be bound to reap the fruits in either case. As for the brothers . . . bah ! . . . in the final winner was a staunch ally. Fermal Bey puffed at his pipe a while, and fell into a train of pleasant thoughts.

From out of doors came the ring of excited voices and hurrying footsteps. In the armourer's workshop there was a clank of metal, and the hammers never ceased beating down upon the resonant steel.

From near and far resounded the neighing of horses and the restive stamping of their hoofs upon the pavement.

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Zared fell to beating the big drum as soon as Fermal Bey had informed Sheikh Abdallah that they were nearing the camp. The sheikh, who was riding at the head with Mansur at his side, drew rein.

'Where?' he asked, knitting his brows so as to enable him to see better.

Fermal Bey described an enormous semicircle with his hand.

'Everywhere?' the sheikh asked again.

'Yes; we have placed our troops to meet the dispositions of the enemy.'

Sheikh Abdallah's face grew intensely thoughtful.

'Do you allow the Infidels to decide your movements?'

The Turk marked the scorn in the question, and answered, nettled :

‘Modern warfare puts great demands . . .’ Then he stopped, piqued ; it sounded for all the world as though he were saying over a page out of the recruits’ drill-book.

‘What has become of the Infidels?’ was the sheikh’s next question.

‘They are farther on . . . inside the circle.’ Fermal Bey leaped from the saddle, and eagerly began to draw a few lines with the toe of his boot. ‘Just look here, Sheikh Abdallah!’ he cried. ‘Here lies the town,’ and he bored a small hole in the ground with his heel. ‘And here are the enemy’s lines. Over there, in front, ours.’

The sheikh pondered a while.

‘So if we ride straight on, we shall be sure to meet with them?’

‘Certainly we shall! But, surely, you do not mean . . .’

‘Yes, I do.’ Sheikh Abdallah turned round on his horse. ‘Louder, Zared! When the sun is overhead, we shall ride to the attack.’

‘Sheikh, you must surely realise . . .’

A wave of the hand in dismissal was the only answer.

Fermal Bey bit his under-lip. It was no use to say another word on the subject, so much was plain from Sheikh Abdallah’s whole demeanour. Something else, besides the Bedouin’s blind love of fighting, conduced to his resolution. On the way the Turk had tried more than once to din into Mansur’s head a notion as to the preparations which were necessary for a modern battle. The young Arab had listened with his thoughts elsewhere, and when Fermal had asked

if he had understood him, the reply invariably was :

‘First the fight, then the victory.’ And with a dreamy smile that had never left his lips since the march began, he would add : ‘And then happiness.’

Fermal Bey had shrugged his shoulders angrily, and left Mansur to his thoughts. He had next turned to the sheikh. For hours together he had ridden silently at his side, awaiting what seemed to him a good opportunity for beginning his descriptions and advice.

Not a feature altered in Sheikh Abdallah’s face. Calm and unmoved, he allowed the Turk to run on. And when the latter stopped in pique, he asked indifferently :

‘What, then, in your opinion, is the one thing needful ?’

‘Training—tireless, unremitting training. Believe me, sheikh . . .’

But Abdallah interrupted him with a patronising wave of the hand, saying :

‘Cannot the Beni Hamka men shoot ? Are not their horses swift as the wind, their arms strong, and their hearts full of courage ? What more would you have ? Allah—may his name be praised, now and for ever—will reward them for their bravery.’

Fermal Bey’s every objection rebounded unappreciated against Sheikh Abdallah’s calm superiority.

The Turk saluted, saying :

‘Where our headquarters have been removed to now, I cannot tell you. I will seek out the staff.’

'Do as you think best.' So saying, Sheikh Abdallah affably waved his hand in farewell.

Fermal Bey set spurs to his horse and went off at a gallop. He simply could not trust himself to stay longer, lest his discontent might explode. He turned aside to the right over a mound of sand and discovered at a short distance an immense tent. The red crescent above showed him that it was the field hospital.

Some ambulance officials came out with one of the surgeons.

'Headquarters?' answered the latter to the captain's question. 'The day before yesterday, I seem to remember seeing somewhere over there'—he pointed to the left—'Moussa Mehemet's escort, but to-day . . .' he ended in a shrug. 'If you have time to ride to Ain-Zara, it will perhaps be possible . . .'

'Isn't there a superior officer anywhere hereabouts?'

'Assan Bey rode by a short time ago.'

'Which way did he take? Hallo, here comes an orderly!'

The man in question was able to tell the captain that the major, Assan Bey, was a kilometre farther on. Fermal Bey gave his horse its head, and rode in the direction pointed out to him.

Assan Bey was a small, stout man, with keen, small eyes and very quick in his movements. He was squatting in a newly dug trench of communication and munching a morsel of black bread, the first meal of the day. A little farther on a company of soldiers was encamped on the sand.

The captain saluted and made his report. The major's eyes grew smaller and smaller as he listened. He nodded his head two or three times, chewed, and gave a gulp.

'Good!' said he as the captain came to an end. Then he looked round cautiously, saying: 'We are preparing a little surprise for them near Bu-Meliana; but it will take time to get everything ready. It wouldn't be a bad thing if we could divert their attention here. The more troops they concentrate here, the better for our fellows in the east.' He gulped down what remained of the bread, and wistfully shook his head when he discovered the case-bottle to be empty. 'How many of them are there, did you say? About six hundred, and all in the best of fettle for a fight? Good! An attack here will cause our friends over yonder to send up one or, perhaps, even two battalions. That will make one less at the springs, straight away. Hallo, there, orderly! My horse!'

Half a minute later the two officers, with several soldiers behind them, were riding to the place where the men from the south were awaiting them.

'Are you very fagged after your ride?' asked the major. 'Otherwise, I intended to ask you to take over the command of the company we have left behind us.'

'I should be very grateful to you for it. . . .'

'Good! You see, the captain sprained his ankle yesterday; and a day or two ago the first lieutenant got a stray bullet in his shoulder. The man in charge at present is the merest youngster, and, if it comes to fighting, I cannot rely on him. It is settled, then,

that you will lead the company by and by? Good! I cannot be everywhere at once myself, and the front is the devil of a length.'

The major laughed merrily; it was plain that Fermal Bey's arrival had rolled a load off his shoulders. 'Beni Hamka, did you say?' he babbled on. 'Big and powerful clan that, eh? Townsfolk as well as husbandmen? Not so bad, really. Listen, captain! I have got to the bottom of these Arabs. No use in our trying to teach them a military idea or two. Besides, we haven't the time to spare. They must learn by themselves what it means to fight an enemy armed with modern weapons. To hold them in would be unwise. So, first, we will make use of their love of fighting, and, afterwards, we will profit by their thirst for revenge. Believe me, captain, every war, nowadays, has its special character, determined by racial contrasts or, if you like it better, by belief or unbelief. Our present war differs from all the others in more ways than one. Thanks to the great Powers, it will not touch our European territory; and, what is more, our expenses, compared with those of Italy, are trifling. Which for us is the main point, eh?'

Assan Bey's small eyes sparkled mischievously as he continued: 'We must make our friends on the other side pay as much as possible for the business, and that's all about it. The costs of our honourable opponents amounted from the start to a million *lire* per day, in round figures. If we can only manage to leave them out of pocket to twice that tune every day, we need not worry about the end.'

Fermal Bey stooped forward and listened with all

his ears. These (anything but military) views were not precisely new to him, to be sure ; but, up till then, he had never given them much consideration.

The major chattered on tirelessly.

‘ This war, you know, is a pretty simple speculation on our opponent’s part. Let’s see. The affair will cost us so much ; it will bring us in so much. But they have made a slight mistake in reckoning the transaction ; they have underrated our resources. Six thousand well-trained troops in Tripoli, and extremely unpleasant neighbours in Europe ; *basta*, as our friends over there say. No, captain, the business wasn’t quite so simple as they thought. And if it’s to their interest to cut the expenses down as low as possible, it is to our advantage to screw them up as high as ever we can. Our honourable opponents fancied this speculation of theirs would be over and done with before a fortnight was out. My idea, you can bet what you like, is that it won’t be over for many a month to come.’ The rotund little man gave a merry laugh, and patted his horse’s neck. ‘ We, of course, have never anything else to reckon with but the items, but it can do us no harm to try to reckon occasionally the grand total as well. If we prolong the affair . . . hallo, there they are ! Handsome lot and excellent horses. And they have brought the tribal drum along, that’s a good sign.’

Assan Bey straightened himself, assumed a dignified mien, and then began in perfect Arabic :

‘ Welcome, children of the Prophet ! I have heard from my friend the captain here, that you are yearning for the fight. Well, you shall be given the place of honour in it.’

Sheikh Abdallah, who had been sitting beside Mansur, stood up and went to meet the major. Neither Assan Bey's insignificant appearance nor his shabby uniform gave a clue to his filling a higher post. But his assurance was too great for a mistake to have been made.

'God bless you!' said the sheikh in greeting.

'God keep you!' answered Assan Bey, and, as if to prevent the other from getting in another word, he immediately added: 'I am in command of the position here. We have just completed our plans for an attack. You and your tribe have come in the nick of time.'

'And where do the Infidels lie concealed?' broke in the sheikh.

'Straight ahead, in the north-west. You need have no fear that they will vanish. Now lend an attentive ear!' The major turned his horse aside, and Sheikh Abdallah followed after, half inclined to resist. 'You, too, captain,' continued the major, evidently determined to do all the talking himself. 'The attack will begin at one o'clock. Look here, sheikh, you will ride by that sand-hill and on through the hollow to the north. When you reach the clump of palm-trees at the back over there . . . no, not those, the eight palm-trees to the left . . . you will halt and wait for the captain's signal. You understand, sheikh? no matter how hot the firing on the right of you may grow, you will wait for the captain's order. As soon as you get it, you will wheel round the palm-trees and ride in an easterly direction. I give you my word that you will meet with the Italians. We reconnoitred last night and know their position. The

thing is to attack them to-day before they have time to get reinforcements. They have got an advanced outpost over there. Wipe that out! Captain, you will also push forward a section, holding the rest of the company in reserve. On the left you will keep in touch with the sheikh's foot. The main attack will be made by the horse. As you hear, sheikh, the whole thing depends on you. So you have understood—good! May Allah—praised be his name—guide your footsteps.' The major waved a friendly hand, saluted, and rode on.

'Captain!' he cried; 'one moment!'

The sheikh looked fixedly after him.

'Am I a dog,' he asked, 'that the man should give me nothing but orders?'

'He talks quickly and has much to say,' answered Mansur cautiously.

'Had I not already said fight, I should scorn his words,' rejoined his father. But his voice was not so firm as usual. The little major, in spite of everything, had shaken his self-confidence.

Fermal Bey galloped after Assan Bey, who at once began to chatter in his good-humoured way.

'I handle the Bedouins after a receipt of my own. I never enter into explanations with them. We should never budge an inch, else. The Arabs don't take much interest in us and, frankly, I can't stand them either. But, of course, that is no reason why they should not be of use to us in our plans. The cleverest thing we can do is to keep on sending them against our Italian friends. The fighting spirit of the Arabs won't last for ever, say I. But so long as it is alive, we must make the most of it. So, you lead the company, but

spare the men as much as possible. If you think anything is to be gained by it, you may join in the fighting. But tell the leader of the section—I can't remember the youngster's name—to let the Arabs bear the brunt of it.' Assan Bey winked slyly, and then harked back to his favourite topic. 'Nowadays, a war brings no end of astonishing combinations along with it. You see, captain, a lost battle means next to nothing after all, and what's the good of blinking the plain fact that we shall not beat the enemy in the open field? But'—a merry laugh broke from the major's lips—'we can perhaps turn the finances of Italy topsy-turvy. Six months, captain, and we shall see. If the worst comes to the worst, we can retire till we reach the back of beyond; while their costs will go up and up until the bottom of their pockets is touched. I have no fear of the issue.' He tilted his head sideways, blinked at the captain with a quizzical expression, and again continued: 'Your company is posted on the other side of that hill. Pump the non-commissioned officer who was in command of the scouting party last night. I will shove forward a company to support your right wing. Ride over there now; I turn off to the right here. Have to inspect the wells by the field-hospital. If we are to fight, we shall need water.' Assan Bey nodded a friendly farewell, and rode on his way, whistling a lively tune.

Fermal Bey pulled up and looked after him. He wished he had known the major well enough to be able to judge as to how much of his verbosity was meant seriously. He ran over in his mind what he knew about the man. The major had acted as attaché to a European Power, and, at the outbreak of the war,

had gone to Tunis. Thence he had got to the front. They said he was a gifted, but self-interested, officer. Fermal Bey stared after the plump, squat figure. He considered himself a typical European, but it had never entered his head to regard war as a matter of £ s. d. pure and simple. There rode the major. In the distance he looked like nothing so much as an accountant poring over his ledgers.

The captain sighed. Had he not heard so frequently of Assan Bey's presence of mind and pluck, such a peep into his thoughts might well have put him out of humour. Fermal Bey dug his spurs into his horse and pressed on to where his company was awaiting his return.

Assan Bey—precisely as Djafar—was a dreamer, whose imagination had been fired by the war. Yes, that was so—and, by the way, what had become of Djafar?

'Captain! Captain!' Sergeant Esjuk came trotting leisurely down a hillside.

'Where are the others?' cried back Fermal Bey from a distance.

'Over there . . . behind the hills! They came in half an hour ago. Captain, they are four hundred strong, and many more are following after! Each tribe has sent home a messenger to tell those who are still there of the march northwards.'

'And Djafar Ibn Hamkal?'

'He has not turned up yet. But he said he would come. They trust him blindly. He is becoming a powerful sheikh. He is the best horseman and the most skilful swordsman in the whole country . . . although the Bedouins . . . But, then, they always draw the long bow. They have not seen Assan Bey

yet. Small as he is, he can handle a sword to such good purpose that Iblis himself could not get the better of him. Anyhow, one thing is certain, the Bedouins will stick to Djafar Ibn Hamkal. The Beni Hamka is the mightiest tribe in these parts. And old Mabrouk has no son. His tribe might be absorbed in the greater. That would be to the profit of the younger son. Sheikh Abdallah has an eye to the future. When one tribe has joined him, perhaps still more will do the same. The sheikhs of El Mur and Ufana are not exactly pleased about it; they, too, have an eye to the future. It is a risky thing to put too much power into a single hand. They are supporting Djafar; for he has no chance against his father and his brother. When neighbours fall out, I step in, as they say in the desert.'

Fermal Bey smiled approval on the sergeant, who had made such good use of his time.

Thus encouraged, Esjuk began again :

' They are going down to the coast in great numbers. They are curious, and think Sheikh Abdallah will win fame and followers. They want to get their share. Before we left Derdj they began to make preparations for marching. But it is rank madness for men who are fighting against the same foe to look askance at one another. If there were but a living man to lead among them, the war would speedily take a turn for the better. I mean, if such a man united the tribes and led them forward, the Infidels would be obliged to turn tail and slink home. But they are ready to burst with envy every time their neighbour has a slice of good fortune—that's the old story. Do you know how they answered me? If the Beni Hamka fight to-day, we shall wait till to-morrow. I said something about

the common weal, but they had not a notion of my meaning. Allah—blessed be his name—enlighten their understanding ! ’

‘ Assan Bey, with whom I have just been talking, is in no way depressed. ’

‘ I have seen him fence. He is prudent and brave ; but a Turk can never unite the Bedouins. Believe me, no one but a native can do it. But where is there such a man ? ’

The sound of a horse’s hoofs caused them to look aside. Some twenty lengths ahead of them an Arab was riding in the same direction as themselves.

‘ Djafar ! ’ cried Fermal Bey, surprised.

‘ Djafar ! ’ repeated the sergeant, adding, as if to himself : ‘ Why, there was not a soul to be seen just now ! Did he drop down from heaven ? ’

‘ Nonsense ! you were lost in your story ; I, in listening to it. ’

‘ Strange ! ’ said Sergeant Esjuk, and shook his head. ‘ A moment before, ’ said he in an excited whisper, ‘ I looked all round me and saw nothing. ’

Djafar Ibn Hamkal rode up and greeted them with a slight inclination of the head.

‘ You have left a long road behind you, ’ began Fermal Bey politely.

‘ The same length as yours, ’ replied Djafar, smoothing the folds of his robe. He directed his gaze to the crest of the hill, along the southern side of which they were riding.

‘ And now you are here, according to your promise. ’

‘ Yesterday I was at Bu-Meliana. ’

‘ Your horse is fleet. ’

‘ Fairly so. ’

Fermal Bey had a string of questions on the tip of his tongue, but was restrained from giving them utterance by the other man's deliberate replies.

Sergeant Esjuk, on the captain's left, looked across at Djafar with a mixture of mistrust and admiration. The Arab saw the glance and said :

' I have seen the men whom you follow. I have also seen my father's warriors. They are longing for the fight to begin.'

' And you ? ' Fermal Bey flashed round on him to catch the expression on his face.

' I should like to see and learn,' answered Djafar, quietly meeting the glance.

They had reached the summit of the hill and instinctively tightened rein. The height overtopped the sand-hills round about. From where they stood they had an extensive view of the surrounding country.

At some distance on his left Djafar discovered a partially ruined house. He rode thither at once. There he was able to observe everything going on about him without being seen himself. When Fermal Bey and the sergeant—who at once saw the advantage which these walls afforded them—joined him, it was to note that he had produced a field-glass, and was scanning the horizon with it. The mere fact that the Bedouin possessed such an instrument was enough to make the captain consider him more closely. He was splendidly equipped. The carbine on his back was of the very latest make ; the Brownings in his belt were in good order. That he knew well how to use them, Fermal Bey had seen already. The sword ran parallel to the horse's side, tightly strapped under the Arab's left thigh. There was something beyond the common,

something that inspired respect, about this warrior, which aroused the Turk's astonishment, and caused him to alter a good many of his preconceived opinions of his strange allies.

Fermal Bey awoke out of his dream of musing and looked around. The spot they had reached offered a splendid outlook. In the background rose a line of steep sand-hills; while, here and there between them, a few palm-trees stretched their unkempt heads to the sky. Through an opening the red crescent marked the whereabouts of the field-hospital, back there in the south-east.

Fermal Bey put up his field-glass. The hill on which they stood sloped to the north; at its foot stretched a belt of stones, brightly polished.

'A dried-up stream,' said Fermal Bey, half aloud.

Djafar nodded Yes.

On the other side of the stream the country rose up in terraces. The stumps of a few palm-trees, recently felled, poked up out of the ground. On their left were pitched a small number of dirty-looking shelter-tents, with a section of Turkish soldiers grovelling in their shadow. Right up on the crest of the heights three men lay flat on the ground; their backs turned to the observers, they stared to the north. Not daring to bare their heads in the intense heat, they had covered their red fezzes with sand.

Djafar nodded when he noticed this. The fellows had done wisely. The red colour leaped to the eye against the surroundings of sand. He directed his field-glass to the right. At the foot of the adjacent height lay still more soldiers under the shadow of the hill. A young lieutenant, scarcely more than a

lad, strolled up and down the river-bed, smoking a cigarette, and hacking at the blades of halfa-grass, which grew around, with his sword. He was obviously bored, for he yawned more than once and stretched his arms. To the left the gully made a sharp bend, and slipped out of sight towards the north. At that spot a few soldiers squatted, with their rifles between their knees. They kept on turning to the left as though talking to some one, and when this happened, they would look up the hillside. From this, Djafar concluded that some of their comrades were not far off, on the upper side of the dried watercourse.

This, therefore, formed part of the Turkish position.

'And over there, far away, are the Infidels?' asked Djafar, sternly. 'Can we see them?'

'Scarcely. During the daytime they lie low.'

Djafar's field-glass extended the range of his investigations. Nothing was to be seen but one sand-hill after another, with an occasional cluster of palm-trees, and, far away in the distance, a misty haze that wrapped the landscape as in a veil of greyish gold. Djafar shut up his field-glass and dropped it into its case.

'And you?' he asked Fermal Bey.

'I am here to take over the command of that company down there.'

'I will go with you.'

They left the small, ruined building and rode along the topmost heights. One of the sentries on the opposite hill looked round and saw them. He crept a few steps backwards, called out a few words in a low voice, and then waved a hand.

'Come, look sharp!' cried Fermal Bey to the sergeant. 'They can see us from the other side of the

valley.' And with loose reins he galloped slantwise down the slope.

Djafar smiled. It was, of course, imprudent to go straight down at such a rate ; but he could rely on his thoroughbred. And, sure enough, when Fermal Bey pulled up in the dry watercourse, who should be standing there but Djafar, alongside his horse.

The captain dismounted and introduced himself to the young lieutenant, who came rushing up, visibly delighted at this interruption in the deadly monotony.

'How far are they away?'

'About a kilometre. We exchanged a few shots with their outposts, but it did not amount to a fight.'

Not a word escaped Djafar, who kept close to the officers.

'Can we see their position?' he asked.

The young lieutenant measured him with a lengthy gaze, winked with one eye, and turned to the captain for enlightenment. That a sheikh stood before him he took for granted, but . . .

Fermal Bey gave the lieutenant a nod.

'Come along!' said he.

They drew a few paces away from the soldiers, who had approached nearer in their curiosity.

'Djafar Ibn Hamkal,' said the captain, introducing the Arab, 'the son of Sheikh Abdallah, of whom you must often have heard.'

The lieutenant certainly never had, but he smiled all the same to oblige. The vanity of the Bedouins was a matter of common knowledge, and he knew the easiest way of flattering them.

'The Beni Hamka tribe has adjourned the last part of its fantasia to the seat of war.'

The young man looked at the Arab with inquiring eyes ; he did not understand him.

The captain explained the situation in a few words. The lieutenant laughed merrily, gave another bow, and assured Djafar that he had never heard of anything like it before. Did they seriously intend in broad daylight . . . Well, a little skirmish would not come amiss, life at the front being as dull as it was.

‘ Nothing ever happens—absolutely nothing ! ’ he complained, striving to be as European as possible, so as to impress the taciturn Bedouin.

They climbed the slope and crawled up on a small breastwork which the pickets had piled up with their hands.

Djafar looked round. Everywhere, the same endless wastes and barren solitudes as before.

‘ Where ? ’ he asked.

‘ Over there—a little more to the left,’ explained the young lieutenant fussily. ‘ There, on this side of that clump of palm-trees, they have dug themselves in. But I ’m hanged if I know what for. On the other side of the hill lies a bigger detachment. If we only had a cannon or two down in the watercourse . . . Sidi Djafar Ibn Hamkal, don’t hold your field-glass with the lenses uppermost ; the sunshine might catch it. An awkward thing happened only the other day. The first lieutenant lay down there—you know, hidden snugly away, with a few palm-leaves over his head, and his nose stuck in the sand. But, presumably, the sun had glittered on the lenses of his field-glass. Anyhow, suddenly a shot or two went off. A bullet went clean through his left shoulder. There was nothing for it but to take him to the ambulance.’ And, with an air

of such ingenuous self-importance that Fermal Bey was hard put to it not to smile, the lieutenant added : ' You must be prepared for that sort of thing, I can tell you. Let them say what they like, it 's war, you know.' He leered across at Djafar, who lay impassive. ' I wonder if that Bedouin has taken it in now ? ' said his eyes.

Djafar scarcely listened to what was being said around him ; but, since the talk was of the reflection of the sun, he covered the lenses with his left hand. For a while he remained lying down, scanning the horizon slowly from left to right with his field-glass and pausing at certain places before continuing the round ; then he put up the field-glass, crawled backwards, and, as soon as he got far enough below the crest of the hill to be hidden from the north, he stood up.

' Now I have got it, captain ! ' Djafar's voice had a ring that silenced all thought of objection. ' Three sections : one on the height here, another straight in front of the bend in the river-bed, and a third moving forward.' He bared his left wrist, and looked at his watch on the strap round it. ' It is time for the men to start.'

Fermal Bey, who had crawled down to him, gave him a quick glance. The tone of this unusually competent Bedouin was not to his liking. He was on the point of inquiring who was in command there, when Djafar forestalled him, saying with sublime composure :

' I shall stay with my men on yonder hill. They are only a handful at present, but more will soon come.' He stood up and went down the slope. ' Send the sergeant to Sheikh Abdallah with the order to advance,

and tell him to bring my men with him on his way back. I shall keep him with me, and send him back to my father when the right moment comes.' And, without waiting for an answer, Djafar jumped on his horse, gathered the reins in his hand, and prepared to ride away.

Fermal Bey looked at him out of the corners of his eyes. Djafar's proposal was the simplest and the best. With a shrug and a nod the captain gave his assent.

Djafar bowed his head in farewell. He was quite satisfied with the result of the test. The captain was a sensible man, with whom it was possible to work smoothly. He rode slowly along the river-bed, beckoned to Sergeant Esjuk to follow him, and in his company continued his journey to the east. He resolved to avoid the hill.

'Captain!' The lieutenant turned his boyish eyes beseechingly on his superior officer. 'You will allow me to lead the attacking section, won't you?'

'I was just going to ask you to. But you will keep out of range, unless you find a particularly good opportunity. . . . But there, you know all about that.'

'Of course! Many thanks, captain!' And, fearing he had allowed his zeal to outrun his discretion, he added by way of explanation: 'I have never been under fire yet.'

Fermal Bey grasped the youngster's hand.

'You can start,' he said heartily. 'I am to be found up yonder, on the crest of the hill. Good-bye!'

The lieutenant hurried away to take command of his section. The captain climbed once more the

slope. As he passed by the shelter-tents he called two of the corporals to come with him. Before he had time to regain his former position behind the breastwork, he heard the sound of men walking in step. With commendable haste the lieutenant had got his section ready for marching. The captain gave a smile of approval. It then occurred to him that he had not been told the lieutenant's name. No matter, he could get to know that later on. What was more serious, was that he had not expressly forbidden the plucky youth to join in the fighting.

'Lieutenant!' he cried down the gully, 'you understood the order, didn't you? The Bedouins carry out the attack, you support it with your fire.'

'Oh, most certainly . . . unless, of course, a particularly good opportunity presents itself.' Delighted as a child at his commission, the young lieutenant saluted with his sword. But he accelerated his steps. He was in a perfect terror lest his chief, sent so unexpectedly to the company, might take some other fancy into his head. 'Not to join in the fighting . . . Why, certainly not,' he thought. 'Except at a particularly good opportunity.' And the lieutenant smiled hopefully. 'There! we have rounded the bend of the river-bed, and now the captain can't possibly call to us.' He broke into a happy laugh, like a child. The hour he had longed for, dreamed for, had come.

At the summit of the hill Fermal Bey lay flat on the sand and stared over the landscape. When just now he had scaled the slope once more, he had seen something moving in the ruins on the crest of the mount on the southern side of the gully. A silver-grey

lightly built horse stood waiting beside a heap of stones.

Djafar, standing behind a crumbling wall, piled stone on stone, climbed atop, and then looked over the top of the wall. His bronzed face was impassive as ever, but his eyes blazed and flashed. His busy brain worked tirelessly.

Had his hour come ? Had it really come ? Look ! a few black specks stood out suddenly against the yellow sand. Djafar directed his field-glass on them. They were Turkish soldiers. The lieutenant with the big boyish eyes, who gave himself such childlike airs of importance, had left the river-bed with his section. Djafar watched them with interest.

Farther on, on the other side of the hill, the ground was as flat as a pancake. The thing was to cross the open space and reach one of the steep sand-hills on its border.

The men crawled forward, one after the other. First came a bearded, broad-shouldered corporal, showing the way. Behind him followed the others, leaving a broad furrow in the loose sand. On the right of his company crept the lieutenant. He raised his head every now and then and spied about, after which he said a word or two to his men. The corporal at the head, stood up and bent double, ran at least twenty paces. Then the next man stood up, and immediately afterwards the next, and then all the others in turn.

Djafar fancied he could hear their panting right up to where he stood. In such a heat, and with their bodies bent at right angles, running was an exertion.

One tiny moment later the men lay in a row on

the rising ground, that hid them from the sight of the enemy out there to the north. The young lieutenant raised himself up on his arms and peered to the front. Nothing led him to suppose that the opposite side had noted that the attack had begun.

Djafar counted up the soldiers in the line on the plain below. He was about half-way through them, when something came into view a little distance away on the left. He looked in that direction. A larger body of men were seen marching in a dip north-westwards. The Beni Hamka foot were advancing on the left out of the long hollow. And, see! white, waving *burnous*, galloping horses with harness inlaid with silver, bright gun-barrels and shining swords, which glittered in the sun: Sheikh Abdallah was riding with his men-at-arms to give battle.

With a swift glance Djafar measured the distance between the small Turkish troop and the two detachments; all three had the same objective. For a while the Turks still kept the shortest route; and when Djafar had scanned the ground, he saw that it was also the hardest. Only a flat plain, with nothing but two or three stiff undulations in the sand to serve as covers. Before the Bedouins, on the other hand, lay rough, broken ground, and, so long as they stuck to it, they were covered by a line of low-lying hills. But the hollow in which they were advancing swerved off to the north, and when they got out of it, then . . .

On a sudden the troop of Bedouins began to run forward. A man—it was of course Belkassem, the bravest fighter in the clan, who was leading the foot-soldiers—pointed to the right with his scimitar, and the whole multitude, with a scramble and a bound, stood

on top of a sloping hillock and disappeared on the other side.

Djafar instinctively clenched his fists when he saw the bold movement so unexpectedly and so quickly carried out. But Belkassem had taken part in many an engagement ; his courage was proved, and he was famed for his skill as for his daring. The old Sheikh Abdallah showed his good sense in selecting Belkassem, who was the best man to lead, after . . .

The report of a shot, fired from a great distance, rang in Djafar's ears.

It was clearly an appointed signal ; for all at once the scene changed. Farthest away on the left the troop of horsemen spurred to the front at full gallop. The dust flew up and covered rider and steed with its grey veil. Nothing to be seen now but the flash of their steel. And then . . . the whole troop went roaring up a hill, and away out of sight over its crest.

Below, in the plain, the foot set off at a run. But, whereas they hastened to the north, the horsemen still continued to move westwards. Belkassem extended his men in a long line, and the bare-legged Bedouins rushed forward like mad. Before them lay the rough broken ground, where good cover was afforded them by some wild, ill-cultivated gardens and by the foundation-walls of a house which had lately been blown up.

By that time the Turkish section on the right had also left its position behind the low sand-hills. Now, as once before, the men advanced at the double. On this occasion their objective was a cluster of palm-trees.

Djafar's field-glass ranged hither and thither from one of the three detachments to each of the others ; they

were pushing forward to meet a fourth, of which till then he had seen nothing. But now there reached him on the wind the report of a crash of musketry. Somewhere in front of him the enemy lay concealed, and never slackened firing. Against . . . Oh, look . . .

A puff of smoke eddied in the air, and close to the ground came a line of dim flashes ; they flamed out, died down, and again flashed out. There were the Infidels.

Some one touched Djafar lightly on the arm. He looked round, angry at the interruption.

‘ Mechuel . . . what do you want ? ’

‘ The men of El Mur, Ufana, and Derdj are waiting behind the hill. Until their own sheikhs arrive, and even when these come, they will follow you.’

‘ Good ! Tell them to stay where they are.’ Djafar turned again to the battle-field. This time his field-glass rested for a long time on a horseman far behind in the west. ‘ What ? ’ he muttered, in a voice like the growl of an enraged dog. No ; he was not mistaken : the man towering at the head of the mounted column wore on his head a dark green turban. The green colour, reserved for the use of the lineal descendants of the Prophet, was a sure sign that the sheikh meant to take the fighting in grim earnest. The sacred colour was not abused for enterprises of lesser moment. ‘ What ? ’ cried Djafar, yet again. The man riding at Sheikh Abdallah’s side wore an exactly similar turban. It was really the case ; his good field-glass had not deceived him. His brother . . . the younger son . . . was chosen as his father’s successor. Every hope of a change in his prospects was shut out ; the thought of future greatness miserably at an end. Djafar Ibn

Hamkal, with his tremendous plans and vaulting ambition, had nothing left to hope for.

A cry, which made Mechuel start and gaze at his master in terror, burst from Djafar's throat.

'Sergeant Esjuk?' he asked hoarsely.

'Present!' With his hand to his fez, the sergeant stood in the doorway of the small, ruined house.

'Ride as hard as you can clap spurs to your horse, to Sheikh Abdallah over yonder and order him to open the attack.'

'The captain . . .'

'Asked me to tell you. Time presses! Off with you this very instant!' And Djafar stamped his foot on the ground.

'If the captain asked you to tell me, all well and good.' And the sergeant turned on his heel and hurried out. Directly after, the beat of a horse's hoofs was heard.

'Master, what are you thinking about?'

'About what must happen.'

'And your object?' asked Mechuel with a crafty sidelong glance.

'Wait and see.' It was more a command than an answer. Djafar turned his back on his willing tool and again put himself in a position to watch the battle-field.

On the right the Turks had reached the clump of palm-trees that formed their next objective. There, for the time being, they halted. Squatting behind the trunks of the trees, or lying flat on the ground, they were rapidly blazing away their cartridges.

On the left of them the Bedouins had collected in smaller groups. From behind the foundation-walls of

the demolished house and out of the thicket of the gardens, they, too, kept up an incessant fusillade.

Djafar nodded. Till now the battle had turned out as he had expected. He estimated the distance between the opposing lines at about four hundred metres. The Turkish contingent stood a trifle nearer; the Bedouins a little farther back.

Out of the trenches of the Italians there pelted a never-ending hail of musketry. The defenders were vastly the inferiors in number, but it plainly never entered their heads to evacuate their position. On the contrary, their firing grew more rapid and . . . Djafar gripped the field-glass tightly with both his hands. Out there in the sand a shell exploded behind the Bedouins' position. The ground was ploughed up, a torrent of dust and soil whirled in every direction, an angry lightning hissed, and a sharp detonation rang up to where he watched.

Djafar gave a quiet, faint smile when he saw that no one was injured. But, despite the misdirected shot, he felt uncertain, undetermined. What effect would the artillery have on the assailants? To all appearance his countrymen had not even noticed the shell. But what about the next . . . and the next? He wondered. Another shell, still farther away, struck the ground. Djafar smiled contemptuously. Was their vaunted artillery not more dangerous? The third shell exploded on the edge of a tumbledown wall. Stones and sand eddied overhead when it burst, and . . . no mistake about it . . . this time some men were hit and . . . Djafar clenched his hands. The next moment his eyes flew to the west. The horsemen had reached the palm-grove, and, better still, not one of their opponents had

detected them. And, for certain, the latter were not more than a bare thousand yards away from the lines of the attacking force. Close by was a low hill. Once past that, even ground lay before them.

And at that very moment a single horseman was seen riding at full speed towards the palm-grove. Sergeant Esjuk was a quick, keen, and able man ; in another minute or two he would reach the goal.

‘ Good ! ’ murmured Djafar, and never took the field-glass off his messenger.

The musketry now crashed out like some strange music, at once lulling and inspiring. In between rumbled the dull thunder of the guns, punctuated, when least expected, by the bursting of the shells.

Djafar’s field-glass moved from left to right and back again. What had happened before was repeated. The Turks blazed away their cartridges ; the Bedouins, to the left, fired shot after shot, and . . . The field-glass stopped on the palm-wood, which Sergeant Esjuk had now reached. Something immense, something green, flashed into sight ; the flag of the tribe was seen waving above the multitude. Djafar listened with all his ears. Was not that . . . ? Yes. With the monotonous firing commingled a muffled sound. No one, previously unacquainted with it, would have been at all likely to have detected its meaning. But Djafar heard it and understood. It was Zared beating the tribal drum. With his left hand he hammered out an endless roll on the one side ; while, between the pauses, he cudgelled the upper end with his right knuckles. The blows fell with such force that the drum sobbed and whined. The time grew quicker. Djafar fancied he saw the sweat streaming down Zared’s swarthy face.

The green flag flew high in the air. A wild, blood-curdling cheer rose towards the crests of the palm-trees. Beni Hamka's men were riding to the assault.

The Turkish section reached a clump of palms ; not a single man had been lost.

'They have been napping over there,' laughed the lieutenant to an old corporal at his side.

The corporal nodded. He was a broad-shouldered man with a bristly, grizzled moustache overhanging his mouth. His eyes peered out stolidly beneath the half-closed lids, and he had not an idea in his head. He had fought against rebels in Arabia and in Syria; he had been shifted from garrison to garrison. In the end he had stuck fast here in Tripoli. He was a puppet, an automaton. Tell him to go, and he went ; cry out 'halt,' and he stopped. He took no interest in anything.

'Sight at four hundred metres !' cried the lieutenant excitedly.

The men had begun to shoot already. Every now and then there came a crack, as the Italian bullets bored into the palm-trunks.

'They are shooting too high !' shouted the lieutenant to the corporal.

The other nodded. He was kneeling behind a palm-tree, and, for his part, he never fired until he had taken careful aim. He had smelt powder more often than he could count ; and, if questioned, could have told stories of hundreds of engagements. But his superior officer asked him nothing, and he himself had forgotten the combats. Why think of what is past ? Automatically he loaded his rifle, took aim, and fired ; never slackening.

The lieutenant rose up on his arms and looked across at the Italian position.

‘They think we are perched in the trees overhead.’ He laughed merrily, ironically. ‘I can hear their shots whistling in the palm-leaves.’

The corporal could not see the jest. He gazed at his superior officer with reverent affection. Who could help liking the lad? He never bullied his men, and a common soldier never gave him the regulation salute but he got paid back with a brotherly nod of the head.

‘Couldn’t we have a try now to get within arm’s reach of them?’ he shouted into his neighbour’s ear.

The corporal, with exasperating composure, measured the distance up to the Italian trenches. Then he glanced deliberately across to the Bedouins concealed in the broken ground. And then he shook his head.

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders irritably. Of course, No—never anything but No—whenever there was any fun to be had. If only he had known for certain what a favourable opportunity was. Look! a shell bursting out yonder! Now the artillery had been pushed forward on the other side. Surely, this time they might press on and greet the gunners with a volley?

‘Corporal! . . . now’s our chance, eh?’ But the corporal shook his head again, telling him with a nod to lie quiet.

Oh, confound this automaton that could only answer No to every question! The lieutenant was seized with rage against him, as sudden as it was irrational. And . . . what now? Ah, yes, another shell! Every pulse in his body began to tingle; his temples beat as if something were knocking inside them,

fast and hard. And now . . . Surely his brains reeled? Was he ill? The fit passed immediately; but . . . How was a fellow to keep his head clear in such a devil of a row? Weren't the Turks banging away as if they were stark mad, and the Bedouins, yonder, wasting their ammunition as though they had inexhaustible supplies? The Italians didn't spare their ammunition either; but . . .

The corporal respectfully gave his lieutenant a gentle nudge with his elbow. That meant: 'Look out! Why don't you keep under cover like a sensible fellow?'

'What's the matter?' growled the lieutenant, who would not understand. The waiting made him irritable. Hallo! that shell went off in the very thick of the Bedouins. And they jumped up, too. Did they mean to fly? No; the bulk of them lay still and went on firing. But what if they were to begin to shell his men! What should he say in answer to his superior officer if he alone survived? His brain reeled; his temples hammered. Answer? But what the deuce was he to answer to? And when he asked the corporal, who had been in so many battles before, he only got a shake of the head in reply. But, then, he, of course, had no responsibility to face . . . Very well, then, but if the men advanced without any word of command from him; what if they . . . Hallo! The Bedouins were charging.

'Praised be Allah! . . . Allah! . . . Allah! . . .'

The lieutenant gripped the butt of his revolver with all his might. The agony of uncertainty had vanished. With headlong strides he dashed forward over the level sand.

On both sides of him ran his men. They had ducked their heads between their shoulders ; some even shielded their faces with their left arms. Not much protection in that. The lieutenant laughed out loud, and then . . . then again his sight swam. He couldn't see a thing ; he reeled in the air ; his feet . . . No ; he had found his feet again. His chest panted, he ran so hard ; his hand tightened convulsively on the revolver-butt. If only that uncanny mist would clear ! His forefinger pressed the cock, and the revolver went off with a bang ! Yes, most certainly, he was storming the enemy's position, and quite right too ! Forward ! Allah ! Allah ! Forward ! A deafening roar : the air hummed again ; the earth quaked as if it would split asunder beneath the soles of his feet. Wan flames flickered unsteadily, he knew not where ; hot winds swept over the field and tore the mist in pieces—as rough hands might rend a veil. The hammering boomed in his temples.

And then he saw. There, twenty yards away from him, stood the Italians. They had crowded together, behind the trenches, in two bodies. Their rifles rained down bullets. They huddled close to one another ; they looked pale . . . Allah ! Allah ! An officer stood by the first group, stooping head foremost. His Browning cracked. And he was the target. The lieutenant's lips parted ; his teeth glittered like the fangs of a beast of prey. An overmastering impulse to scratch and bite and slay possessed him. ' Thou dog ! ' he cried to the enemy's officer. ' Thou dog ! I am coming ! . . . Oh ! ' A burn, as if red-hot iron were being pressed against his chest. He stumbled, tottered on a step. Again the smart in his breast. They had got the

better of him ; the iron burnt itself into his body to do him to death. Down upon him dropped a pall of impenetrable mist ; it felt so curiously cold just round the burn. There was a crash, a roar, as if the whole heavens fell in suddenly . . . His forehead struck the ground ; he was . . . he was . . . the platoon . . . his responsibility . . . But, it was a favourable opportunity. . . . ' Forward ! '

The old corporal, who had stood by the lieutenant all along, uttered a roar of fury. See ! there fell the friendly youngster who was always hail-comrade-well-met with him. Why, only a day or two ago he had even made the corporal a present of a whole handful of cigarettes ! And now . . . out of the long-dried-up well in his heart there bubbled up, suddenly, something passionate and strong. His forefinger crooked itself round the trigger ; his hand was of a piece with the butt, and he ran forward at the top of his speed, his rifle levelled straight in front of him. And, behold ! bullet and bayonet found their mark ; he had avenged the youngster. They were wont to show their staunch comrades this service, were the old veterans who had grown grey in the field.

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Sheikh Abdallah stood under the palm-trees at the head of his men. The haughty smile on his lips bore witness to his scorn. Too much honour was being shown to the little band of Infidels over yonder. Was he to trouble himself about the orders of a Turkish busybody, who would have conveyed the notion that he understood the game better than everyone else ? But he had pledged his word, and that he must keep. He

was still Abdallah Ibn Hamkal, the sheikh of the Beni Hamka, he supposed.

At his father's side sat Mansur on a snow-white steed. He kept his eyes steadily fixed on the sand-hill, in the rear of which they were waiting.

From the other side came the sound of firing. Sometimes the reports came few and far between; then on a sudden they rang out in a volley, and the din became quite indescribable. Mansur knit his brow in thought. He had never heard anything like it. The Infidels were brave men; nothing suggested that they would give way to the enemy. So much the better; they had come there not to be spectators of a flight, but to bear a part in the fighting. The fame of the Beni Hamka fantasia would travel far. It suddenly occurred to him that, perhaps, the Turks were charging in order to claim the victory. He urged his trembling horse a few paces forward. He wanted to see . . .

Sheikh Abdallah held out a restraining arm.

Mansur led his horse back to his place. Neither father nor son said a word.

A hundred paces away a shell exploded on the right of the horsemen.

The horses snorted and neighed, the men glanced aside, wondering and amazed. Only the sheikh sat unmoved, as though it were no business of his.

Mansur, curious, turned his eyes to the right. Ah, so that was a greeting from the guns! He followed his father's lead and gave a careless shrug of his shoulders. They aimed badly; why, there were no assailants out there on the plain! At that very moment he met his father's eyes. Pride and love shone in them, and some-

thing else as well. A flood of feeling welled up in the son's heart ; he warmed to his father. He would have liked to reach out his hands and tell him how fond he was of him.

By and by Sheikh Abdallah turned round in his saddle. Out of its white wrappings, which he let fall to the ground, he took something and held it up above his head. All present saw it ; it was a green turban.

'My son !' called out the sheikh.

Blushing with delight, Mansur bowed towards him. He had understood. Sheikh Abdallah took off his son's white head-dress and in its place put on the green turban. With crafty calculation, he chose just this moment for appointing his successor.

The men around him thought only of the symbolical meaning underlying the action, and cheered approval. If Djafar had had supporters among them, they were thenceforward dumb.

Sheikh Abdallah's hands slipped down from Mansur's head to his shoulders, and rested there in blessing. For a while father and son looked deep into each other's eyes. A sob of gratitude broke from the young man's breast.

'Now you know,' said Sheikh Abdallah to the men standing round him.

The applause deepened. Eager hands fingered the rifle triggers ; the men itched to fire a shot in token of their joy. The sheikh stretched up his right hand in refusal. The men crouched in their saddles. Of course, they admitted, such a thing was not just then appropriate.

The second shell burst out yonder in the sand.

The sheikh gave no sign this time either ; he

quietly exchanged his white turban for the green head-gear which he had by him.

'God's blessing be upon you!' cried an old Bedouin, and flung up his arms to heaven in rapture.

'Allah akbar! Allah akbar!' mumbled the men, looking at one another, their eyes blazing with pride. Where else in the whole of Africa was there a tribe that rode into battle behind two green turbans? It was not his descendants who led the men of the Beni Hamka into the combat, but the Prophet himself. And from four hundred throats there rang out a cry, irresistible and jubilant: 'Beni Hamka! Beni Hamka!'

'Zared! . . . the drum!' said Sheikh Abdallah, when the rejoicing had subsided.

Zared, lean and small, settled the drum on the horse's neck. With the long stick in his left, he struck a few blows on trial. Then began the muffled, never-ending roll. It sounded like the humming and buzzing of millions of insects.

'Like angry bees, isn't it?' said a Bedouin with a bristly beard.

'Angry, indeed!' replied a middle-aged warrior, and shook his rifle threateningly. 'Angry!' he repeated in hoarse, gurgling accents, as if his throat were suddenly compressed.

Zared cudgelled his drum harder and harder with his left hand. And, by and by, his right fell on the hide as well.

The men flung up their heads; their eyes began to flash.

Zared stooped over the drum and ground his teeth in the wood.

'Allah akbar! Beni Hamka!' It sounded hollow,

overburdened, as a cry of pain wrung from panting throats.

Zared sat up again in the saddle. His burning eyes never left the drum, on which his teeth had left their mark. He struck a few quick blows with his right fist.

‘Allah! Allah ’kbar! Beni Hamka! Fight!’

The old Bedouin, who had called down God’s blessing upon the sheikh on his donning the green turban, cried out that a horseman was approaching from the south-east.

Sheikh Abdallah looked in that direction, and recognised Sergeant Esjuk. With sovereign unconcern as to what was to happen, he gathered his reins together and cried :

‘Allah!—may his name be praised now and for ever—guide our footsteps! Forward!’

‘Allah akbar! Beni Hamka!’ Their lungs breathed at their ease; their throats shouted sonorous and strong. The men standing at the end of the line wheeled round to the wings, to right and left. In a long, extended line the men of the Beni Hamka charged the hill and rushed down its northern side. The centre, in the rear of Sheikh Abdallah and his son, slowed, in order to give the wings time. Above, the commander waved the green flag. Last of all came Zared with his drum.

With a cry that rent the air the troop moved swiftly to the front. The eyes of all were bent on the enemy’s trenches. The Infidels were not preparing for flight; besides, it would have been too late if they had been. And just look! . . . over there, their comrades on foot went bounding forward. Sheikh Abdallah nodded. Belkassem was a man of courage,

and knew what he was after. The sheikh bestowed a moment's thought on this old desert-ranger. He was a fanatic, who loved his God with his whole soul, and who blindly obeyed every word that fell from Abdallah Ibn Hamkal's lips. Had he told the man to sharpen his dagger, and then mentioned Djafar's name, Belkassem would have understood him. Better the peace of death, in Sheikh Abdallah's opinion, than discord between sons and disunion in the tribe. But enough of that. . . . Over there his men were running like mad dogs. They had a long start, but the horsemen would quickly overtake them. The Turks, too, were afoot and charging to the fore. The sheikh swung his sword above his head ; he allowed no one to get in front of him. That would have been an indelible disgrace.

'Allah 'kbar ! Beni Hamka !' The shouts grew hoarser ; but the eyes blazed in the bronze-coloured faces, and the fists gripped their swords as though they had been the limbs of the detested enemy. The horses snorted, the harness creaked, the stirrups jingled, metal rang on metal. Dust and sand swirled round the horsemen, who tore ahead in a delirious race.

Sheikh Abdallah looked at his son. With shoulders squared and eyes shining with the lust of battle, Mansur Ibn Hamkal charged forward, in order to stand his trial as a man and show himself worthy to be the chieftain of a great and powerful tribe. A beautiful smile lit up his father's stern features. At that very moment came a loud, deafening report. A flame shot up from the ground, splintering its surface, and knocked down two horses. Sheikh Abdallah's eagle-eye ranged over the battle-field and his voice rose, crying :

‘Charge! Faster!’ A shell from the Unbelievers had fallen in the middle of the left wing; others would follow. And over there, like dark spots on the sand, some of Belkassem’s men were left for dead. ‘Faster! Forward! Charge!’

The horses flew onward, the battle-cries resounded, defiant and challenging; the drums threatened to burst.

Sheikh Abdallah drew himself up to the full height of his lofty stature, and gripped the hilt of his sword with a firmer grasp. In a few moments the horsemen would be on a line with the foot-soldiers; another moment later, and their objective would be reached. The rifles of the Unbelievers spat fire and lead on every side. But all their last efforts were vain; their courage could not save them. The semicircle was closing mercilessly round their position. The horses would dash over them; they would trample them underfoot, grind them in pieces, and wipe them out. . . .

‘Allah akbar!’ The words burst in triumph from the sheikh’s lips.

Mansur galloped on at full speed. He was more curious than anything else, and his eyes flared about him restlessly. Over yonder, Belkassem’s men were hastening to the selfsame mark as himself, and behind them others came pounding along. Mansur dug his heels into his charger’s flanks, it was going too slowly. When he looked down, it was to see how the ground beneath him slipped by, and . . . and . . . What was the matter over there . . . on the left? A number of voices were uplifted in pain and fury, and the horses were neighing so piteously. Oh, another shell had burst! Vengeance on the Unbelievers! He looked quickly to

the right, and met his father's eyes. He felt proud and overjoyed at the thought that one day he was to be the successor of this intrepid sheikh whose holiness had made him famous as a marabout. He must perform some brilliant feat of arms, requite his elevation in the only way which . . . What ! . . . Djafar . . . his brother ? If mollahs and father would have it so, Djafar had just got to submit. His brain whirled as though a crowd of thoughts were clamouring to be heard then and there. An intoxicating dream of happiness held him spellbound. He felt giddy ; the ground gave way under him ; the clouds overhead slipped away. It seemed as if his horse hung in endless space. He saw nothing, heard nothing more of the battle that awaited him. Round about all was silent and blank. But in front of him it grew brighter. From a certain point whole sheaves of yellow, sunlit rays poured out ; and in this radiant centre, upon a throne of gold, sat a young maiden, veiled in bright-coloured silk and decked with pearls and precious stones from head to foot. Her arms hung straight down at her sides ; her eyes, the twin suns whence came the new light, beamed with meek tenderness and with adoring love.

‘ Risja ! ’

A crash close beside him, as though the world collapsed. The air shook, and he fell into a bottomless abyss. All round and about him flames shot up, yellow-red and scorching, and in his body countless sharp knives were at work. With the speed of lightning they tore open his side, hacked off his left arm from the trunk, and slit open his left leg from hip to ankle. Pain and terror weltered down upon him with unendurable pressure. He would have thought it over.

But there was nothing he could hold on to ; no starting-point—nothing ! He was seized with the fear, with the horror, of the unknown that no one can understand.

In a moment of terrifying comprehension he felt his horse break down under him. Something warm and thick and sickening overflowed him. The pains were there again ; the knives cut, the flames burnt. He drew a deep breath ; an odd, stale, disgusting smell nearly choked him. He closed his eyes wearily ; his head had found a firm resting-place. His lips opened in a heart-rending outcry :

‘ Risja . . . our happiness . . . ! ’

Then something happened which he could neither see nor yet grasp.

The babel raged from end to end ; the ground burst in pieces that whirled up to heaven in clouds of sand and dust ; the air was rent in shreds.

From Sheikh Abdallah’s throat there rose a cry like the roar of a wounded lion. At one and the same moment the old man wanted to pull his horse up in its stride, and wished it had wings to bear him faster onward. He must rescue his son, and yet at the same time he longed most passionately to avenge him . . . at once, at that very moment. The horse reared up, danced on its hind legs, came down again, and flew on.

A green plume of feathers fluttered past the sheikh. A shot singed his *burnous* ; his sword fell, slipped along the barrel of a rifle, struck against something hard, and stuck fast. Once more the blade flashed up, whistled down and hewed the air. The horse swung round and bolted. Blinded, giddy, and with a rankling feeling that something had occurred which was inconceivable and which he yet must understand, Sheikh

Abdallah was borne away. He groaned aloud with pain, and drove his teeth furiously into his under-lip.

The uproar around had grown beyond his comprehension. His nerves cringed under its weight; his body rocked to and fro in violent convulsions. He bit his lip through, and forced himself to be calm. He saw and understood.

His warriors were in headlong flight. Their horses raced madly in every direction : to the western hill over which they had ridden to the battle; to the south along the valley through which they had crept to their defeat; to the east where cover there was none. The men sat huddled up in their saddles. Bereft of their senses, they had no other thought than to get away . . . only away! And the foot-soldiers stampeded . . . stampeded, like the others.

‘Beni Hamka!’ The bitter cry fell from the sheikh’s bleeding lips.

He looked away over the field of battle. In an endless line the Italian soldiers came rushing up towards him. The bayonets, fixed on the rifles in their hands, glittered in the sunshine. An eruption had flung them up to the surface of the earth; a moment before they had been the merest handful; now they could be counted by thousands. The wave-like, irregular line extended on the one side far beyond the left wing of the Beni Hamka; on the other, it reached past the insignificant body of Turkish troops. Sheikh Abdallah’s eyes opened wide with wonder, his face was haggard, and he kept on sucking at his blood-stained lips.

With a roar the long line swept towards him. The plumes in the soldiers’ helmets bobbed up and down in

time to their steps ; the bayonets rose and fell. Every now and then a man dropped down. Sometimes he never moved ; sometimes he stood up again and hurried on. All ran with mouth wide open ; they ran shouting. Their cries rang louder. The crackling of the musketry was drowned in the noise of their voices ; and the guns . . . they were silent.

The sheikh's horse stretched its neck and whinnied uneasily.

Abdallah Ibn Hamkal forced it to stand still. The rider had forgotten something or other—something which he must needs remember. Not the ignominious flight of his tribe : that was not it. . . . Oh, all of them had not taken to their heels after all ! Over yonder, on his right, about a hundred rifles—no more—went off with a crack.

' Belkassem ! ' cried the sheikh, his heart eased of a heavy burden. The stubborn old desert-ranger had saved the clan's honour. With a remnant of his men he had effected a lodgment in the trench they had carried. Sheikh Abdallah's satisfaction gave way to a chilling apprehension. They were only a handful, he saw—a tiny body of undaunted fighters—against more than a thousand assailants bearing down upon them.

The long line came on with a roar. It was now so close that the sheikh could distinguish the men's features. There was no end to the row of faces, expressionless, streaming with sweat.

The eyes stared uncannily, as if lifeless ; the lungs panted with the terrific effort occasioned by this race in stifling clouds of dust and in the scorching sun. But a will that doubled and redoubled their strength

drove them on and on. The hoarse voices yelled tirelessly; the men in their frenzy drew inexorably nearer and nearer.

All on a sudden the whole line dropped to the ground. A series of shrill bugle-calls shrieked through the air, and then the firing broke out. Angry flashes blazed out, and, in the roll of musketry, all else vanished.

The trench, to which Belkassem and his men stuck with tooth and nail, was turned into a boiling kettle. A hurricane of lead poured into it. Sand and gravel were tossed up, bullets pelted down like hailstones. And, to complete the horror, shells exploded in the furrow. A few men crawled out of the trench, and made desperate efforts to dodge the shower of lead. Most of them were laid low, but some of them reached the rough, broken ground from which the last assault had been made.

Everything happened in the space of a few seconds. Sheikh Abdallah shook his head over this appalling quickness. The Italians had flung themselves down fifty yards away from the trench round which the battle raged; and the soldiers were at hand already. The last of the Turks could be seen running towards the palm-grove on the right, and Belkassem's Bedouins were again driven out. There lay an unprecedented power in this counter-attack, and, thanks to their discipline and good shooting, a sureness and confidence in the proceedings which carried the day.

A stifled cry of anguish broke from the sheikh's throat.

'Mansur!' Allah had chastened him for his insolence in having wished to remove the fantasia to this

place. Allah !—may His name be praised now and for ever ! He spurred on his charger to confront the line which still spat shot and shell. A bullet whizzed past his turban. Sheikh Abdallah smiled scornfully at himself and his far-reaching plans. A shell of the Infidels had been their undoing. All hope was gone. He settled himself in his saddle, raised his head, and brought his horse to a walk. Were it the will of Allah that he must fall here, Abdallah Ibn Hamkal would not flinch aside.

Behind the hill to the west, the Bedouins disappeared who had fled in that direction ; but single horsemen were still scuttling across the plain, and in every hollow and furrow small parties of foot sought shelter from the devastating fire.

With proud contempt for all that was taking place, Sheikh Abdallah brought his horse to face the living crater that vomited the hail of lead. His son's dead body, or death for himself, had been his cry a moment before ; his watchword now was : Mansur and death.

Over yonder lay something green on the ground—the flag of the tribe.

‘ Beni Hamka, where is now thy power, and where the bravery of thy warriors ? ’

What now ? Did the Infidels intend to push forward their cavalry in order to wipe their adversaries completely out ? No ; horsemen on the point of charging never sat their saddles in that way. Oh, 'twas the guns—those infernal guns ! . . .

‘ Mansur, my son . . . ’

The green turban lay blood-stained and tattered beside the thoroughbred, whose ribs protruded through

the flesh. Mansur had fallen on his back, with one leg under his charger's body. About his pallid lips a doubtful smile still played.

Sheikh Abdallah leaped from the saddle and began to free his son's dead body. Mansur Ibn Hamkal's remains should not fall a prey to prowling hyenas.

Twenty, or perhaps thirty, paces in front of him stood the Italian riflemen. A few heads were raised ; eyes strained their sight ; brains endeavoured to grasp what the solitary Arab was doing out there in the shower of bullets. Something cruel and malicious flashed in every face. The figure all in white was an excellent target. Bang ! went the rifles yet again.

Heedless of the downpour, the sheikh took his dead son in his arms.

' Beni Hamka's hope ! Allah, thy will be done, not mine.'

An officer rose up in the line of riflemen.

' The rascal means to jeer at us ! And you fellows shoot like regular bunglers ! ' A pair of huge eyes, blazing with anger, flashed upon the lonely man out there on the plain. A thick moustache, carefully waxed at the tips, was caught between thumb and finger and twisted up under a small, round nose, so that a row of strong, even teeth lay bare.

' Hand me a rifle ! '

Sheikh Abdallah set the lifeless body across the neck of the horse that was scenting the air uneasily.

' The flag ? No ; Beni Hamka's future was a thing of the past.' He got into the saddle. For several seconds he sat bolt upright and stared the enemy in the face. They had seen how a whole tribe

had taken to flight, outnumbered as well as overpowered by the superiority of their arms. But the sheikh of the tribe would take his time in quitting the scene of the defeat. He would go step by step—Mansur and death. Allah!—blessed be Thy holy name—do unto me what thou deemest good ! ’

‘ Such insolence ! He defies us ; he laughs ! ’ With head flung back and every muscle in his body strained tight, the Italian officer ran a few steps forward.

Sheikh Abdallah noticed it not. Deliberately he swung his charger round, and kept it at a walk.

‘ Another rifle . . . cartridges ! ’ roared the officer in his rear. He took steady aim, as if on the range, and fired.

A convulsive shiver passed through Sheikh Abdallah’s lofty frame. From behind a sharp-pointed object had bored its way through a knee-joint and splintered the knee-cap. He laughed grimly, scornfully, contemptuously. Hundreds of rifles had singled him out as a mark. He heard the bullets whirring past. Like loud cracks of a whip they sounded in the air. No sooner was one shot fired, than two, three—no, ten more fell about him on the ground.

See, there lay the tribal drum, broken into shivers. Zared’s open mouth and cloven forehead yawned up at him. Round the dead man were strewn horses, men, arms . . . The sheikh nodded quietly. Allah’s wrath had fallen heavily on the Beni Hamka. In his eyes now was a question. ‘ Was it . . . was it the enmity between his sons . . . ? ’

‘ Bismillah ! ’ he said out loud. One of the blows of the whip struck him on the shoulder. It burned like fire, and then felt cold as ice. ‘ Bismillah ! ’

The horse, bleeding at the loins, bore his master over the sand. The bullets fell thick around them.

‘My lord . . . over here!’

Sheikh Abdallah raised his eyes from his son’s dead face.

‘Belkassem?’

‘Yes, my lord!’ A half-naked, sinewy Bedouin jumped up close to the horse’s head, urged the animal into a quicker pace and, holding fast to the stirrup, ran alongside himself. ‘That was a great fight,’ he panted. ‘Twenty of my men are sleeping their last sleep over yonder. And of the horsemen . . . just as many . . . what? To the left . . . behind the sand-hill! Allah be praised, we are now in safety!’

‘My son!’ whispered Sheikh Abdallah, absent-mindedly.

‘Mansur?’ Belkassem stooped forward, he had seen nothing else. He wore a blood-stained rag knotted round his head. ‘Dead? . . . and you yourself, my lord? Wounded?’ Belkassem turned round to his warriors. Achmed and you, Hadjubu, support the sheikh, he is falling! So . . . so . . . slowly! Let not the green turban slip from his head! Rend your garments, Beni Hamka’s warriors! Strew ashes on your heads! The sheikh and his son . . . Make room . . . Make room for Abdallah Ibn Hamkal and his dead son.’

A sigh, that sounded like a groan, burst from Djafar’s breast. The thunder-cloud which all on a sudden had swooped down upon the small Italian detachment had been dispersed. Torn in ribbons,

it drifted helplessly away. The lonely observer looked in astonishment over the battle-field.

The exhibition of strength, as sudden as overwhelming, had been imposing. Those thousand soldiers and more, all rising out of the earth at once and charging forward in a long, scythe-like line, had swept everything before them. They had never pressed right up to the horsemen, nor had that been necessary ; their mere presence had given the struggle a new aspect. The assailants had then sunk into the earth again and lain panting and thirsting for vengeance on the yellow sand. Their rifles had vomited fire and bullets. Every living creature in front of them had fallen. And as if the rifles had not been enough, the guns had been dragged into action. They had crashed and boomed ; they had mutilated and slain. The shells had ploughed the earth up ; the hail of lead whistling through the air had whipped the ground on every side. Dense clouds of dust eddied round the fugitives who, in panic-stricken haste, were now hurrying from the battle-field . . . away, away, the farther the better.

Djafar had watched each incident with his field-glass. He had seen his fellow-countrymen fall and flee, and had remained hard, cold, and resolute. A defeat could be wiped out ; if the assailants had been superior to the defenders, they would have won the day. He leaned against the wall and turned a searching glance on the battle-field.

In the west the foremost Bedouins were slipping out of sight over the hill with the palm wood atop. Here and there a man fell and never got up again. But the majority outran death.

‘ Bah ! ’ Djafar shrugged his shoulders ; the business

was not nearly so dangerous as he had thought. The tribal flag was lost, the drum smashed in pieces. No matter, his father too must go, and make room for the new times, the new men, the new methods. The bulk of the horse had been saved, and that was the main thing. A flight was, anyhow, better than extermination.

Over yonder rode a solitary horseman with . . . was it a wounded or a dead man that he carried in front of him across the horse's neck? What? The green turban . . . His father and his brother! Djafar looked up to the cloudless sky; and his eyes also framed a question.

'Who has triumphed?' He rapped out the answer: 'I have.' He looked down upon the lonely horseman, half curious, half compassionate. And with ironical pity he added: 'The fantasia!' The very next second he clenched his hands. How could a man famous for his craftiness have committed that unpardonable blunder? All the better, 'it cleared the way for himself.' Djafar nodded thoughtfully . . . 'the way . . . for himself . . .'

The Bedouins on foot had, comparatively speaking, got off with a whole skin. True, they had left a good many dead and wounded in the rifle-pit which they had carried, but beyond on the field but few dark specks had fallen to rise no more. Like startled birds they ducked in the trough of the sea of sand, and crept on and on.

Djafar scanned thoughtfully the long line of Italians. The bullets over yonder flew far too high. The soldiers did not rise high enough above the breast-work. Their first thought was to shield themselves;

their desire to damage their foe came in a bad second. Upon the fierceness wherewith this desire was satisfied depended the enemy's losses. Djafar smiled proudly. Those were the facts of the case beyond a doubt. And as here, so in other battles. The tremendous expenditure of ammunition, the ear-piercing, nerve-shattering uproar, all that was common to all battles. He had seen and learned.

Besides, the Italians had every occasion to be prudent. The remnants of the Turkish section, a dozen rough ragamuffins bathed in sweat, retreated anything but fast. In each tiny dip in the ground four or five men would squat down, fire off their cartridges and then retire step by step, whilst their comrades in some other hollow poured in shot after shot.

Djafar's smile grew approving. That was the way to do it. What magnificent fighting men those Turks were, to be sure. So far from leaving their wounded in the lurch, they held the enemy in check. As they slipped down into the deep valley, Djafar laughed aloud.

Hardly had the last of the Turks disappeared than a volley at once resounded above his head ; the reserves had waited until the plain was clear to open fire on the Italians.

Once again Djafar nodded. Over yonder the assailants had been scattered like chaff before the wind, but here they were supported by their comrades, found help and cover. A Turkish company on the right began a heavy fire ; on the hill opposite to him the soldiers never ceased shooting and from the river-bed below him rose a crackling fusillade.

' I see,' thought Djafar, and turned at once to the

Italian lines. The effect of the sudden downpour, so nicely timed and so well directed, was at once apparent. The left wing of the Italians, being the most exposed to it, was drawn back a little, while the right was pushed forward. The line of riflemen, indeed, stretched up to the palm-grove whence the Bedouins had charged down upon them. But into the recesses of the hills and valleys they dared not advance, and, consequently, the engagement came to a standstill. A few shells struck down an enemy now and then, but the discharge of musketry gradually ceased, first on the far-distant right, then in the centre, and, in the end, on the left wing. The Turks, in shooting, took the cue from their opponents. All they had wished to do was to check the attack. As soon as they had succeeded in that purpose, they stopped firing.

The spectator lowered the field-glass. He had seen and learned.

The sun had dipped low in the west. Djafar looked at the watch on his wrist-strap. After which he took a last look at the distant horizon. The stillness after the din of the battle had an oppressive effect. Djafar smiled his father's haughty smile, flung back his head and left the ruins.

Outside lay Mechuel under the tumbled-down walls. He had thrown himself flat on his back and, as if hypnotised, stared blankly to the north with his one eye.

'Wait there for me!' And Djafar strode past.

Some hundred Bedouins had collected on the hill. Whether squatting side by side upon their haunches or lying huddled together on their faces, they never took their eyes off the enemy in the distance.

‘Wait for me down yonder!’ ordered Djafar, and walked on. The silver-grey thoroughbred followed him as a dog follows its master. The man in command went along the northern slope of the hill.

Fermal Bey came towards him in conversation with the little fat major.

‘Bloodshed nowadays is a mere detail,’ said Assan Bey, lecturing in his usual loquacious fashion. ‘But nothing can be done without it, so people think. Europe, you see, is sitting at home, as in an amphitheatre, watching our efforts with all her eyes. She would hear about us, she would gloat over bloodshed and slaughter retailed in her newspapers. She would never forgive us if we cheated her out of the minutest telegram. It wouldn’t suit her book to forget us. Well, to-morrow we will send her a gentle reminder. To-morrow Europe shall learn that Italy has gained another great victory over us. Europe will be grateful to us and requite our goodwill with a benevolent smile. Come, come, unknit your brow, captain! Europe’s goodwill can be of a good deal of use to us. Just look here!’ He showed a note-book which he held in his hand. ‘The freights are going up all the world over. I have got a little schedule here. When Europe begins to feel the pressure of the rise in prices on her own case, she will be driven to put on her thinking-cap. This time it is no fault of ours, and so perhaps the benevolence she feels for us will be expressed in a strong opinion in our favour. If we can only keep her interest in our affairs alive, there is nothing we may not expect.’ The major looked at his comrade with self-satisfaction. ‘Give us time, and you shall see . . . time, I say . . . time . . .’

Djafar, who knew Turkish, gave ear. Was there something to be gleaned here? Well, he would have a talk with the fat major later on. Assan Bey seemed only too ready to let his tongue wag. With a slight bow of the head Djafar strode past the two officers.

The major looked after the Bedouin.

‘Do you know him intimately?’

Fermal Bey shook his head.

‘Humph, I don’t like the way he behaves.’ Assan Bey made a dissatisfied face. ‘What I don’t like at all . . . well, listen . . .’ and, theorising as usual he added: ‘The problem of our opponents can be solved, but that of our allies . . .? I can only warn you from making the attempt.’

Djafar went past a group of soldiers who had thrown themselves recklessly on the ground. Panting with the exertions of the retreat, with their blood still boiling from the fury of the engagement, they lay about in the strangest positions. Some were even asleep. Facing the men sat an old corporal with expressionless eyes. His grizzly moustache was all bristles and hung down over his mouth; his yellow teeth were clenched on a filthy rag, which he was trying to knot round his wounded left arm.

Djafar walked on. Two guns had been moved forward, with their muzzles sloping upwards. If the Italians ventured to come any nearer, they would have been given an unpleasant surprise. And on the hill on the right several hundred Turks were lying in wait. Should he extend their line with his Bedouins . . .?

‘No.’ Djafar smiled ambiguously. He stood still for a while, walked haughtily to the rear, and then passed on. The very next moment he was in the

saddle and away at full gallop. He had seen and learned.

Outside in front of the ambulance a dozen of wounded Bedouins lay on the sand. A Turkish surgeon went from man to man and instructed a few attendants as to what in each case they were to do. He had just dressed Sheikh Abdallah's wounds and left him by himself in an hospital tent.

A little farther on the warriors of the tribe had encamped themselves; they looked a disheartened little band. No one uttered a word; all stared blankly at the tent doorway. In the forefront sat Belkassem. His eyes were nailed on the entrance, and his brains kneaded a single thought. When he asked if there was any hope for the sheikh, the surgeon could give but one reply—a shrug.

Djafar leapt from the saddle, told the horse to stay where it was, and then went straight to the tent door.

The surgeon stepped in his path to stop him, but Djafar brushed him on one side.

‘My father!’

‘Are you? Well, of course, it will be all the same in the end.’ The surgeon stood still and Djafar passed by.

He stepped into a dusky anteroom. On a wooden bench lay Mansur's corpse.

Djafar gazed on his brother with an expression of curiosity mixed with pity. He had neither loved nor hated his brother. The wise man looks not at the instrument with which one would strike him; he looks for the hand that would deal the blow.

From an adjoining room came a faint groan. Djafar's bowed figure rose up as if on springs. He

dashed aside a curtain and stood at his father's death-bed.

Sheikh Abdallah lay stretched on a camp bedstead. The eyes in the blanched face smouldered with fever. On his head he still wore the green turban. The descendant of the Prophet had made up his mind to go into the presence of his ancestor wearing the badge of honour.

With a glance Djafar caught his father's eyes and compelled them to fix themselves upon his own. For a while father and son looked at each other. It was the father who was the first to turn away. The son drew a few steps nearer. Calm and unmoved, he first took off his own head-dress, and then he reached out his hand to his father's green turban.

A violent convulsion shook the sheikh's body when he felt the touch. Immediately after he lay there impassively and allowed his son to do as he thought best.

Djafar set the green turban on his shaven crown. Nothing betrayed the triumph of which he was sensible ; no ill-considered movement, not so much as a tremble indicated that he had reached the first goal of his life. His eyes dwelt with deliberate, but searching intensity on his father's rigid face, with the merest dash of reproach added.

‘Do you hear me?’

Once more his father averted his eyes ; he would elude the fascinating look.

‘I will avenge you.’ Djafar pressed the turban firmly down on his head. For a few moments more his eyes rested on his father. Then with a shrug he left the room.

Sheikh Abdallah looked after his son. It was his own youth that vanished behind the curtain. Purposeful, unyielding as steel, swift as a lion crouched to spring . . . There went the man who had appointed himself heir to the honour of his ancestry, quitting his father's death-bed and striding past his brother's corpse.

Outside by the tent door Djafar stood still with crossed arms.

Belkassem confronted him with an expression of enmity in his eyes. But when he saw the green turban, he leaped to his feet and salaamed low; he felt disconcerted.

'My lord . . .'

'Yes; I am your lord. Serve me faithfully and I will forget what once you were.'

Behind the old desert-ranger the mourning Bedouins had also risen. A shout of surprise and joy burst from the lips of many of them.

Djafar raised his hand, commanding silence.

'You, Belkassem,' he began in a low voice, 'look to the burial of my brother's body. In the hollow on the hither side of the palm-grove you will make the grave, and place it to east and west, as prescribed by rule. And about him you will bury the fallen. When the angel Gabriel comes down this night from the highest heaven, he must find the Beni Hamka warriors ready. Go! As for you others, behold your sheikh. As Gabriel and the djinns who accompany him, so I too expect to find you ready. Vengeance for Abdallah Ibn Hamkal and my brother Mansur!'

In the black eyes of his followers a fierce flame flared up, their hands were clenched to fists, their lips

opened to shout. Once more Djafar raised his right hand.

‘Disturb not the peace of the dying within there. But think incessantly of revenge. Let that thought so eat into your mind that it can never be effaced !— Silence ! One word more. Put your trust in me ! I will procure you revenge. The time and the means, that is my business ; you have only to obey. Put your faith in Djafar Ibn Hamkal, Beni Hamka’s sheikh.’

With a leap that none but he had dared, Djafar flew into the saddle. Yet he did not go away at once, but rode up to his surgeon.

‘The old man is in great pain,’ he whispered.

‘I can do nothing in the matter.’

‘A sleeping-draught ?’

‘Willingly, sheikh, if you wish it.’

‘I do wish it. He must not be disturbed by others. He has nothing more to say.’ Djafar gathered the reins in his hands and galloped on. He knew that behind him all eyes were shining with hope and satisfaction, that once more the warriors cherished confidence and courage. He felt contented.

The green turban was greeted with loud jubilation by the men of El Mur, Ufana and Derdj.

Djafar drew rein and raised his right hand. The cheers were hushed.

‘Your greeting rings pleasantly in my ears. I take it as a proof that in future you will follow no one but me.’

‘We will. We will.’

‘Then I promise you battle, victory and plunder, but neither for to-day, nor to-morrow, nor yet for next month. I shall choose the time and place, when

both are most favourable. Djafar Ibn Hamkal, the descendant of the Prophet, Beni Hamka's sheikh, asks for your trust, for your obedience, your fidelity. By Allah, the lord of heaven and earth, swear !'

'We swear. Allah akbar ! We swear you obedience and fidelity.'

'I thank you.' The silver-grey took a prodigious leap, rushed through the air and nimbly alighted, far beyond the circle that hemmed it in. Like an arrow it shot along the hillside in the gathering twilight.

Behind the horseman hundreds of eyes shone with admiration, as they all gazed after him. He was so unlike their own sheikhs. Who could ride or fence better than he, who . . . ? Fidelity to their clan, to tradition, to . . . A tangle of thoughts and questions arose in their brains. What had they done ? What did they want to do ? Was it not best that they should all follow one leader, now when the enemy had invaded the country ? But the tribes . . . their own sheikhs ? Then, as if they would silence their scruples and drown their anxiety, first one, and then all shouted :

'Djafar Ibn Hamkal ! Djafar Ibn Hamkal !'

Mechuel sat on the crest of the hill. He nursed his chin on his knee and listened to the cheers in the valley below.

Djafar stopped beside him and leaped from the saddle.

'Place yourself where you can see, should anyone come,' he began hastily. 'That's right. To-day you will procure the dress of a carrier or handicraftsman. In that attire you will slink to the east, past the lines of the Infidels. Afterwards you will turn round to the

north and make straight for the coast. Thence it will be an easy matter for you to get within the gates of Tripoli.'

Mechuel started back and reached out his hands in protest.

'You will do as I say. In Tripoli you will seek out Hassan Karamanli, whom our people call the Traitor. And this you will say unto him: "Greetings to the Wise and Foreseeing from Djafar Ibn Hamkal, Sheikh and Marabout. The Bedouins of the southern and western parts of the country follow Sheikh Djafar, and his word is their word. With his eyes he has seen what thy friends can perform, and now he understands thy way of dealing." And then you will add: "What do thy friends the Italians, offer for Sheikh Djafar's neutrality?"—Hassan Karamanli will understand its value. You will wait for his answer and bear it to me.'

'Treachery . . . Master . . . '

'Fool! You have only one eye, but something you must yet see with it. Treachery? No, but it shall be done! By Allah—praised be His name—it shall be a great and a glorious treachery. You are thinking of the Turks. Must I laugh, or must I pity you? The Turks! If Tripoli becomes an Italian province, it will not be because we are beaten. Our fate will be decided not here, but in Europe. Why? Until now the children of the Prophet believed the world to be guided by truth and justice. They have been shown that the guiding stars of the peoples of Europe are cunning, greed, lies, and frauds. Let us become Europeans and follow the example they have set us. Let us plot treason. Therefore it is better that we

husband our strength for another crisis, wait quietly and prepare for war. Now do you understand me ? ’

Mechuel shook his head sulkily.

‘ Our time will come,’ continued Djafar. ‘ They are blinded by their pride, and by their envy of one another they are divided among themselves. Every success achieved by the one is a defeat for his neighbour. And whilst they are grabbing fresh booty beyond the frontiers of Europe, they keep an anxious and mistrustful eye upon one another. Their envy turns to madness, and their greed is a pestilence. . . . I tell you, Mechuel, Europe trembles on the brink of self-slaughter ! You simpleton of little faith, the hour is near. So soon as war breaks out between any two European Powers, all the others must join in ; they cannot help themselves. I promise you wives and treasures. You body-snatcher and kidnapper of children, you dog and son of a dog, you are the best person to deal with the thieves over yonder. Go and bring me within the week the answer I desire ! ’

‘ Master . . . ’

‘ Be silent and obey ! ’ Djafar’s hand flew to the revolver in his belt. ‘ Be of use, you dog, or else . . . What ! are you thinking of the reward ? In the harem that I have inherited, live two widows. Do you crave for more ? Horses, camels, money ? You shall have all. Go and whisper your lies in the ears of the Unbelievers. Or, better still, repeat only their own words : greater lies there could not possibly be. Go ! ’

Subdued by Djafar’s passion, Mechuel salaamed and slunk with drooping head down the hillside.

The brief twilight was on the wane. In the west

the blazing sun flushed crimson as blood and stained the sky with red. In the east the early stars were up and glimmered.

Djafar stood very still ; his arms hung down straight. His pulses beat like hammers ; his brain was hot as fire with brooding over the possibilities of the future. Might he not wait and hope—he who built on a foundation so sure as the folly of the great powers ? The glow in the west went out, the night drew on. With her veil she covered the earth, and in the infinite the stars came out and shone.

Djafar looked up to the heavens.

‘ War between them . . . war . . . war . . . ’ he prayed with passionate fervour.

A shooting-star twinkled into sight and vanished.

V

FEVER

'WATER, Sister, water! And a bit of ice . . . no, a lot of ice, a lot! My head is burning and a stream of molten lead is running through my body! It is burning me up, suffocating me . . . killing me . . . I want to live, do you hear, Sister? And I can't lengthen it out. I can bear no more. . . . What did the doctor say before he went away? Nothing, nothing at all! But he had a serious face, is it not so? Sister, you are used to reading his looks. You must tell me candidly if he thinks my end is near! You really must, Sister! You are always wearing the sign of mercy on your arm, and your eyes are so kind. . . . You must tell me honestly how long I have yet? I don't want to die, and then too, I don't want to live. Can I after all? You need not answer me, need not say anything. . . . Just nod when I ask you. . . . You shake your head . . . you smile. . . . Thanks, Sister, thanks! And now another little drop of water. . . . Oh, that does one good! But you must not go away! Look here. . . . Come closer to me! Quite close! I want to whisper something in your ear. The others must not hear it

on any account. Yes, I am an officer . . . know my duty. But I will say it to you, for you are not one of the combatants. Yes—only some thoughts of mine. They lie like burning coals in my brain, they light it up, but they are burning it away. Pour water over it—water ! One of them is inside here—just here—on the right side. Sometimes it glows a little, sometimes it is only smoke and vapour, but then it blazes up again. The flame licks the vault of the brain from inside . . . from inside, Sister. If you were to pour even the whole Mediterranean over my head the fire could not be extinguished. It lies hidden here inside of me, and no one but me knows the secret. And my thoughts fan the fire again till it bursts out in flames. You see, the thoughts are the worst of it. They creep in and out of the brain, and set it on fire . . . on fire ! They go slinking about, just like the Bedouins in the desert. One sees nothing, has no suspicion that they are so near, until suddenly bang goes a shot at hardly five paces. And then the firing thunders away without a break.

‘ Can you imagine it, Sister,—what a fearful strain it is when one knows the enemy lies hidden all about one ? Wherever you turn your eyes only ridges of sand, ravines and hollows, with here and there a patch of dull green—and the enemy is waiting hidden in the bushes, half buried in the sand. They lie there with finger on trigger watching every step you take . . . safely hidden away . . . invisible. They come spying on you . . . cautiously. . . . Not a sound breaks the stillness. It is only the wind sighing through the grass, and the sand rustles softly under their tread. And just when you feel quite sure that there is no

danger threatening, bang go the shots ! Every nerve in your body contracts, every muscle is rigid for a moment. Then you feel a burning pang in breast . . . in stomach . . . in brain . . . everywhere. Where am I hit ? Where ?

‘ Water—water ! Thanks !

‘ Suddenly you are lying on the sand, you who just now stood erect, strong, full of courage, eager for action. You lie there helpless and wounded and faint. You know that you are abandoned to the mercy, or the mercilessness, of a fanatical foe, whom you cannot even see. He is somewhere or other near at hand, keenly watching your every move, and loading his rifle again. You cannot escape him, you cannot even shrink aside, his rifle is levelled at you, and he is choosing slowly but surely the place where the next bullet is to hit. His eyes are afire with the lust of murder, his . . . more water, Sister !

‘ You are in his power. He can do what he pleases with you. . . . Your pulse beats fast, your lungs are gasping. Where has this brown devil dug himself into the sand ? Where has he hidden his grinning face ? Where ? . . . where ? . . . He is there . . . somewhere . . . behind you, perhaps. He is enjoying your suffering, he reads your agonies in your cramped-up, contracted form. Water . . . no, the sea, Sister—the whole sea.

‘ His bullet comes, swift and sure. . . . It hits its mark, ploughs a way through you, opens a passage through which your blood is running away. All you have is disappearing, as your blood mingles with the sand. . . .

‘ Sister, that man did only his duty, just as I would

have done mine if some lucky chance had led him to make a careless movement, so that I could see him first.

‘Thanks, Sister, you are good! That compress is cooling my forehead so nicely. It is a relief for a few seconds. But it can’t put out the fire inside there. And by its light I see a gigantic sign of interrogation. Why? why? I ask incessantly. At night the sign lights up like a pillar of fire; by day it thickens into black smoke. See, it is standing there, at the foot of the bed. The point at its base is hidden in the bowels of the earth, its curving line curls itself round above like a snake erecting itself to strike; and its head hits against the clouds. Its height is enormous, immeasurable. See, it is shaking . . . it threatens me . . . falls! Help! help! it is falling . . . crushing me . . . I . . .

‘Thanks, Sister, your hand is cool and gentle. Now that thing is bending over me from the other side—now it is still for a while, until again it . . . Look you, Sister, this “Why” is something fearful. When at last it falls down on me, it breaks open my skull, and then the flame inside gets air, and I burn up, consumed with my own fire!

‘Sister, do you know what feeds the fire? Bend down nearer to me—nearer still! I am an officer, of course, and must betray no secrets. It would not be well for the men to get an idea of it.

‘You see, when a thief breaks in and plunders a house, he is punished. The law lays that down, and the law is right. Thieving is a disgraceful business, and it’s all the same whether the thief steals little or much . . . but you understand all that. I have no time to stop over small details . . . I . . . well then,

a thief is a thief. And if he has others to help him in his stealing, they are thieves also. The law pays no regard to their numbers . . . the law is . . . *is* the law.

‘ But you see, Sister, if one nation commits burglary on another, then . . . well, what do you say yourself ?

‘ When the fire flames up I see it clearly and plainly. All over the roof of my brain there is “ Thief ! thief ! ” . . .

‘ It is inexplicable that there is room in the brain for so many words. And written so largely too ! They are as tall as a man, quite an army of letters ! And always these five. They are transparent, they glow and send out an unbearable heat.

‘ Sister, don’t take your hand away. If I ask you a question now, shake your head as you did before ; and shake it for a long time. Sister, am I a thief ?’

‘ Thanks, you are good, you understand me ! What have I to do with the law ? After all, I am a soldier.

‘ Sister, give me your hand, both hands ! Hold mine fast—fast ! Now that fire is flaming up again. That sign of the question is bending about so threateningly ! What noise is that outside ? Why is there that annoying rattling of the window-panes ?

‘ What do you say, Sister ? I can’t understand. Your voice does not carry through the noise. And that thing is falling down on me . . . Help ! . . .’

‘ Cannon, you say. Ha ! ha ! ha ! cannon ? So I . . . a fight . . . nothing else ! It will be down by Bu Meliana again, I suppose ? A fight ; ha ! ha ! ha ! what a droll idea !

‘ That Bedouin I was talking about just now. I never got a sight of him. It is a pity, Sister, but I must tell it to you. I never saw even one Bedouin. I was only a few days here, and then . . . this illness of mine. I was not so well on the transport steamer, but I got really ill only after we landed. Surely it can’t be the cholera. What do you think? My comrades often talked about it, but then they laughed at it . . . just as I do now. No, it’s not cholera. You are right, Sister; why should I think of such a thing? I am not asking half on my own account, but for the sake of my mother. You must see her, Sister. Such a stately old lady! Her hands trembled as she bade me good-bye. Her eyes shone with tears. I promised her I would come back. You quite understand I must keep my promise.

‘ That is right, Sister. You nod and smile too . . . nod and . . . ’

‘ Just another thing, Sister. Did you mention the word “ Thief ” just now, or did I? It’s a shocking business. Whoever steals is disgraced, and whoever helps him is disgraced as much. And one must not keep what is stolen, whether secretly or by open violence—is it not so? If an individual steals one *sou* he falls under the scope of the law—he is disgraced; but if one nation steals away another’s land and people, it wins fame and honour and booty. . . . How can one explain that? That great big questioning sign is there again . . . it is red . . . as blood . . . as fire. . . . Its flames lick the firmament of heaven. I am burning up! . . . Water! . . . an ocean of it to extinguish this hell-fire!

• ‘ Sister, you are a living proof that there is mercy in the world, so I will tell you what I know, what I myself have found by experience. You see that Colossus that hangs over me, over you, over us all : that is—listen to what I say—that is War ! It has the form of a great questioning sign, for no one can explain the “ Why ” of it, even though all are shrieking out their answers. For the moment it hangs threateningly over our nation—next moment over our neighbour. It may at any minute fall backwards or forwards, crushing me or another. But do you see, Sister, how at the foot of it our rulers sit playing cards like a lot of wretched horse-dealers at a country fair ? I see what sort of cards they are playing—pride and ambition, dull stupidity and touchy irritation, and the world stands by and waits patiently for the result. Woe to the weak, for the lack of strength is something unpardonable ! “ You take this, I take that ” is the talk now, and they exchange and divide among themselves, without a thought of the rights of another. That is what they call “ modern statecraft.” Men, how can you be so simple as to let yourselves be the stake for their game ?

‘ Sister, keep your ear near me and I will tell you the truth ! Men deserve no compassion—only contempt. You believe that . . . ha ! ha ! ha ! And to believe is dangerous if one does not believe rightly. You appeal in vain to their reason—they have none ! Don’t appeal to their better feelings—where are they to get any such things from ? Pray for sufferings, that purify and cleanse . . .

‘ Purify and cleanse . . . did I say, Sister ? A mistake, a complete mistake ! All suffering makes men evil. He who suffers himself is ready to

see others suffer. Get out of my reach, Sister, lest I drive my nails into your flesh! I want to bite, and scratch . . . I . . . Water! Water! Sister, did you not hear that shell that exploded in my brain? Hurrah, my brave fellows! Forward! We have dealt a blow to humanity and got it in fairly between the eyes! Hurrah! Only the strong can venture anything, only the brave brings victory home! . . .'

'Now the pain is ceasing and the fire is extinguished. Sister, if I were a dishonoured accomplice in a guilty enterprise, I could never again go back to my mother, never again look her in the face. But I am a soldier who has fought for the greatness and the future of his native land. Mother, dearest mother, your son is coming! See he has his breast covered with war medals, and the cross of honour amid them, over his heart! Mother . . . mother. . . . Help! The Colossus is tottering . . . it is falling on me . . . Why . . . ?'

The door at the far end of the hospital ward opened, and an overtired voice said nervously and excitedly :

'What! Tears, sister? Is he dead? It could not end any other way. He was as delicate and weak as a girl . . . You are thinking of his mother? *Dio mio!* Sister, he has gone off easily enough. What is the noise there? What do you say? Another convoy of wounded! I have got through fourteen operations to-day—fourteen, do you hear? I'm fairly done. Oh yes, you can meantime get him on to the operating table! Rivarato, who is Lieutenant

Rivarato? Officer or reservist, they are all alike when it comes to the knife. Here, give me a gramme of quinine. I have fever. Two of you men take that body away! The bed has been engaged in advance for some time. Disinfection? What are you thinking of, Sister? How can we have time for such things? Besides there is not a drop left . . . it's all clean gone. We were to have had a new supply to-day, but it's so stormy that the ships can't get into the harbour. We must manage as best we can. Turn the sheet, and give the pillows a good shaking out! You must lie down for a while, Sister. You want a rest. And don't think any more about his mother, or about anything at all. I will give you some veronal; that is often a help. War is the fever-fit of a nation. War exists on purpose for people to die. There is no remedy for war but blood-letting. War is a necessity—in other words, civilisation is superfluous. What are you calling for down there? I'm coming right enough. Look, Sister, how my hands tremble! Fourteen operations since early this morning—no rest—no time to eat anything. . . . Who has any time for meals now? Only a glass of wine and a dose of quinine . . . and then I run off to the fifteenth. I am going mad with the overstrain. If I go smash, see to it, I beg, that the hospital people don't put me in among the typhus patients. And if I am officially locked up as a lunatic I shall cry out that war is *not* necessary—at any rate for the doctors. No, I shall take good care to have nothing more to do with it. They may take that, if they like, as a proof that I am incurable. What the mischief are you doing over there? I'm coming soon enough. Get him under

chloroform meanwhile, or give him something else—anything else—we have not any great choice to-day. No, Sister, I keep quiet and cut asunder and stitch together again, and . . . Do you hear how the cannon are thundering? We are getting a lot more to do to-day. See, there is another ambulance wagon swinging in by the entrance! If only my brain does not leave me in the lurch! This sudden noise is something frightful! One has some poor fellow there on the table in front of one, and all is going well. But then a cannon goes bang! somewhere, and one is irritated . . . precisely at the all-important moment. No, now not another word! Wars are absolutely necessary,—was not that what they were saying, Sister? They are right. I am persuaded of it, I believe it, that's the easiest way. Do you know, Sister, I once wrote a treatise, and a critical colleague cut it up, so that there was nothing left of it. He was quite right, but that has nothing to do with the matter. He made me out to be well-nigh impossible. When I go home I shall challenge him to a pistol duel and put a ball through his body. Now that I am thoroughly convinced of the necessity of war, I know also to what purpose one should make use of it. My colleague is so short-sighted that he can hardly see ten paces,—that's a convenient sort of opponent! And when nations begin war to . . . to . . . yes, *why*? Can you, or any other reasonable being say why? Well, I have got provocation; why then should not I . . . Sister, don't mind my talk. It's nothing but over-excitement. [§] The end of the story is that the nations have claimed the right to go mad from time to time . . . war-fever, you see. But individual persons must act

as reasonable beings. Collective insanity and . . . Well, what is it now? He is chloroformed? All right, then. Good-bye, Sister. I don't mean anything by what I have been saying. I'm only tired out. Ready to drop. If you could only have an idea of it! And below there the fifteenth is waiting for me. . . . How my pulse is throbbing . . . We have fever, one and all, from the general down to the boy bugler. But for that we really could not do our duty. This intoxication of fever is necessary—do you see? Without the fever, no war; therefore . . . But when the fever frenzy is over and the collapse comes on . . . it's awful, Sister . . . awful. . . . I am coming now . . .'

The door shut with a bang that set the window-sashes rattling. Just then there came softly the murmuring chant of the 'Mass for the Dead,' and a slight perfume of incense mingled with the infected air of the hospital sheds. Outside the storm-wind whistled. In the distance the cannon were thundering. A third ambulance wagon came jolting in through the entrance gate.

.VI

LIES

‘SIGNOR FONTANARA ! Signor Fontanara !’

The archæologist looked up from the papers which he had placed on the bench in front of him. A small stout man, wearing a red fez, but in other respects dressed like a European, came up the pathway leading to the tent. Fontanara taxed his memory. Where had he seen this man before ?

‘Signor Fontanara !’ cried the man again, making an excited gesture with his right hand.

The archæologist stood up impatiently, annoyed at being disturbed. It came back to him now that the man was a dragoman from one of the consulates—he could not remember which. What could have brought him at this inopportune moment, just as the excavations had begun to take on a promising aspect ?

‘Signore !’ The interpreter’s perspiring face appeared through the opening of the tent.

‘Good evening,’ replied the archæologist courteously, inwardly consigning his interrupter to a hot place.

The fat dragoman squeezed through the opening,

breathless from his quick climb up the hill. He gasped out the question :

‘ You are quite alone, Signore ? ’

Fontanara, nettled by this unceremonious incursion, eyed him haughtily in silence.

The dragoman, innocent of all offence, continued in a whisper :

‘ None of the workmen are about ? ’

Fontanara, for sole reply, stood regarding him with cold disfavour.

‘ Good,’ continued the dragoman, still unconscious of the effect he was producing. ‘ Good. Then will you get your things together at once, Signore ?—and we ’ll be off.’

‘ What ! ’ exclaimed the archæologist, astonished.

‘ You must get out of this at once, there ’s not a moment to lose. This travelling bag here will hold all you can take.’ And he glanced round the tent to see what would have to be packed into it.

‘ I haven’t the faintest notion what you are talking about ! ’

‘ Saints in Heaven ! You haven’t heard the news ! I have only come in the nick of time then. The war has begun. Now you understand.’

Fontanara held out his hand to his visitor gratefully.

‘ And you came out all this way just to tell me ? ’

‘ Well, of course ! ’ he replied. ‘ The fighting has begun in Tripoli and probably in two other localities as well. You can imagine how the Turks are feeling !—they are still half asleep and rubbing their eyes. The whole thing has been carefully planned out. You can take my word for it that it will be all over in a fortnight

and Italy will be in possession of a great new province. *Evviva !*

Restraining himself he continued : ' Of course we could not leave you out here in the desert all alone—it was too risky.'

' I see,' replied Fontanara, his brain in a whirl.

' In a couple of days' time—perhaps even to-morrow,' went on the dragoman, ' the news will have spread throughout the whole of Asia Minor. The workmen here will get to hear of it almost at once, and it wouldn't be long before they began to reflect that there was an Italian living here by himself among them, and—well, you can finish the sentence for yourself, Signore !'

He paused to glance at his watch.

' *Santissima !*' he exclaimed, ' we must be quick if we want to get to the station in time. Don't take any of your clothes, Signore. Only some of your papers, a book or two, your revolver, and above all your money. If you were to bring anything else in the way of luggage, it would look suspicious. There's a feeling about already that there's something in the air. Now, Signore, we must rush things. We have exactly ten minutes, not a second more.'

Fontanara recognised that he must act as the interpreter advised. With all possible haste he collected together his manuscripts—when, he asked himself, would he be able to complete the great task in which he had been absorbed? Next he bethought himself of his money. It was in his pocket book, in a pocket of his best coat. He put it on and changed his fez for a light travelling cap. Then he thought of putting on his boots. . . .

‘Better not!’ said the dragoman, watching him. ‘There’s hardly time.’

After all, he could easily buy another pair in the town. ‘Good,’ he replied, closing the travelling bag; ‘I am ready.’

He stood for a moment at the opening of the tent. The thing had come about so suddenly that Fontanara had not had time for reflection, but now he began to realise bitterly the full bearing of the situation. With what eager hopes he had set himself to the task of these excavations! It had taken him several years to complete his plans and to secure the means for carrying them out. He had been lucky. The State had provided for a portion of the cost, and a number of private individuals of wealth had undertaken to defray the rest. The name of Pietro Fontanara had come to be an honoured one in the world of learning. He had won his spurs in Fiorelli’s school, having carried through certain small excavations with noteworthy results. His inspiring utterances on the subject of the duties of the civilised world of to-day towards the glories and greatness of times past had everywhere called forth sympathy and support. Confident of success he had come to Asia Minor, engaged workmen and commenced operations. It soon became clear that his efforts were to be fruitful. Every day yielded new and interesting discoveries.

And now?

He had made a wonderfully promising start—that was all. The enlarging of a political ‘sphere of interest’ was obviously of greater importance than any researches into the secrets of the past. Obviously—yet was it so obvious? To him the war meant the

destruction of all his hopes—the ruin possibly of his whole career. For how could he be sure that he would ever return here—ever be able to complete what had been so auspiciously begun?

‘Signor Fontanara!’ The dragoman reminded him of the need for haste.

He shrugged his shoulders. Farewell to all his schemes and hopes! The war would put an end to many things besides his excavations. He sighed deeply.

‘Good. Let us go!’

They made their way down the steep path, Fontanara irresolute and despondent, the dragoman with a smile of satisfaction on his fat face.

‘Signore!’ Some one called out from behind—the syllables were not distinct but the voice was resonant.

‘Is it you, Yussuf?’ Fontanara stood still to listen.

In a moment a stalwart, massively built Turk came running after them. He glanced inquiringly at the travelling bag which the archæologist was carrying.

‘An unexpected piece of news,’ he explained hastily. ‘I have to go to town.’

The Turk gazed at him with his frank, honest eyes. He had surmised so. The sight of the archæologist in the company of another European descending the path could scarcely be explained otherwise. And as the journey to town would take two days, if not three, there must be question of something important. Had the Signore no orders to give?

Fontanara looked at him. What a fine fellow he was, this foreman whom a lucky chance had thrown in his way.

How well Yussuf Hali had always understood his instructions, and how efficient he had proved himself in seeing them carried out. A man of no education—where could he have got any?—he had succeeded by dint of his great natural intelligence and immense energy. Within a week Fontanara had learnt to respect him, within a fortnight he had come to have a real regard for him. And his feeling had been reciprocated by the Turk. How openly on all occasions had Yussuf given proof of this . . . and now . . . !

Fontanara was recalled to himself by the interpreter's touching him on the arm.

'Here, Yussuf, you had better take your money for the week,' he said. The foreman glanced at him inquiringly and evidently much astonished. 'It is possible,' he went on, 'that I shall be prevented from getting back in time.'

'But you *are* coming back?' asked Yussuf anxiously. 'I shall rejoice to see you come back.'

'Of course he will come back,' said the dragoon, and the two proceeded hurriedly on their way.

The archæologist looking round presently saw the Turk standing motionless, his eyes still turned in their direction. He took off his cap and waved a friendly farewell. Yussuf raised his hand to his fez and gave a military salute.

Fontanara was reminded by this of the fact that the Turk had served in a Turkish regiment in Europe and had risen to the rank of sergeant.

'What a splendid fellow he is!' he reflected. 'And what luck it was for me that he had that row with a

superior officer, and took his discharge just in time to come to my help.' Or rather just in time to make the present condition of things still more tantalising, for doubtless the excavations would now be carried through by some German or Frenchman, or Englishman.

In a quarter of an hour's time they saw the little station in the distance, but it took them half an hour longer to reach it.

They reached it just in time, and took up their places in an empty carriage. Fontanara crouched up in a corner and abandoned himself to his bitter reflections. All his efforts during three long years had gone for nothing—all his valuable work been rendered of no account.

But he gradually came to feel that there was a reverse side to the picture, and by the time the train reached Aidin he realised that he was beginning to see things in quite a different light. What were these excavations of his but a mere trivial detail compared with the conquest of an entire country—an immense province with incalculable possibilities, an endless expanse of virgin soil, and a scanty native population of half-civilised races. Fontanara sat thinking. The drain upon the vitality of his own country caused by wholesale emigration to America had presented an apparently insoluble problem. This drain would now cease. The stream of emigration would turn round to an Italian colony and could be kept under control, to the advantage both of the emigrants themselves and of their Motherland. Something new and great and full of promise was happening. Fontanara experienced a feeling of joy as these thoughts

came to him. He glanced gratefully towards his companion.

The dragoman sat bunched up opposite, with his legs drawn up beneath him. A cigarette which had gone out hung limply from his lips. He slept. Fontanara was able to study his features now in a leisurely fashion. The man's cheeks were swollen and pasty. His whole appearance was flabby and unwholesome, as not seldom is the case with Europeans who live long in the East.

The landscape was unchanged hour after hour—an endless expanse of parched stony desert, flecked now and again with an oasis of green. The archæologist turned away his eyes from the sleeper and let them rest on the familiar scene. 'This is the East,' he kept saying to himself: 'the drowsy, dreaming, uncleanly East, with its lack of enterprise, its fanaticism, its blind belief in Fate—really it was about time that it should be shaken out of its slumbers! It was to be hoped that the cannon-shots at Tripoli were the heralds of a new era.' He felt, in spite of all, that he loved the region which he had been forced so unexpectedly to abandon. The war had stopped his work, but might it not give him in the end new and greater opportunities for proceeding with it? The deserts of Northern Africa must conceal great undiscovered cities. 'Was there not in Tripoli a triumphal arch of Marcus Aurelius?' He began to feel that his disturbed senses were regaining their equilibrium. He continued to gaze out of the window.

'The awakening!' he murmured to himself.

The dragoman roused up and glanced observantly at his companion; noting the happier look in his

eyes, he began to chatter, retailing not without humour a long succession of stories of the lives of the people of the country—their misfortunes and absurdities.

‘All very much as it is with us,’ reflected Fontanara, ‘though the details differ.’ He shrugged his shoulders. In truth he could not display much interest in this kind of gossip.

The dragoman’s talk flowed on—instance after instance of the slackness and incompetence of the rulers of the land. He laughed boisterously over his own stories.

His own mother, he had to admit, was a native of the country. But he was emphatic in declaring himself Italian—‘A patriotic Italian, Signore!’

Fontanara found it difficult not to laugh. He turned away his face. He knew the type and found it difficult even to be civil.

A sinister look came into the dragoman’s eyes. He was not altogether satisfied with this ‘compatriot,’ who turned aside from him so markedly just when he looked for some kind of friendly recognition of the bond between them.

The train rattled along in the growing dusk. To the west, whither they were travelling, the sun was sinking between two hills. In a moment it had gone, and the whole landscape was in darkness. Heavily and oppressively, with its shroud of clammy vapour, night had descended upon the earth.

Fontanara sighed. He sank back in his seat. The dragoman had fallen asleep again, so he was able to abandon himself undisturbed to his reveries.

‘Was this journey—this flight—really necessary?’

The question was never satisfactorily answered. In spite of the darkness he could see in his mind's eye the scenes through which they were passing. He remembered, from journeys made in daylight, just where the palms stood—those African aliens that throve equally in the stony soil of Asia ; he saw the olive-trees, grey and gnarled and brittle, and the roses, now in bloom, and the wild asparagus. . . . And he recalled, with a tinge of bitterness in the memory even now, the feeling of disillusionment which he had experienced at first sight of the East. It was all so different from his imaginings. The 'Arabian Nights' had filled his Western mind with visions and . . . and . . . His thoughts turned suddenly now to Yussuf Hali. The Turk's face and form were before his eyes as vividly as in life. He remembered how the man had been recommended to him as capable and trustworthy. How Yussuf was called up to be presented to him, and how, half shyly, yet searchingly, he had looked at his future employer's face and then held out his hand. A contract had never been come to with less formality and with better results.

Fontanara shuddered. It had grown cold. One could see it by the haze on the windows.

Yussuf had proved himself the very incarnation of trustworthiness. A little over-cautious, sometimes a little obstinate, he was open to argument and persuasion. He seemed devoid of the faculty of laughter or of appreciating anything in the nature of a joke, but even in this direction he showed an almost pathetic anxiety to learn. And he won the confidence of this foreign employer not by seeking to win it, but just by being worthier of it than anyone else.

Fontanara felt a pang in his heart. He had parted without a handshake or a word of appreciation from this man who had given him such priceless assistance and support. Ought he not to write him a letter, at least, to explain matters ? . . . No, there would be no good in doing that.

Fontanara buttoned up his coat. Certainly it looked mean. He regretted his hasty flight. But surely its very haste would explain it to Yussuf, who was a man of intelligence. Fontanara shrugged his shoulders, and tried to convince himself that he was worrying over a trifle. But it was of no use. It was almost as if a thorn had entered his flesh and had become embedded therein. He, the Westerner, had behaved ill by his friend of the East.

‘It can’t be helped,’ he said to himself wearily. And, after all, what had an archæologist like him to do with the things and the men of to-day ? And he began to dwell again on his own ill-luck—the fruits of all his learning and labours snatched out of his grasp. He was a victim to unfavourable circumstances and there was an end to it. As for Yussuf—well, good luck to him !

He closed his eyes and endeavoured to sleep. The train rattled along monotonously, the woodwork of the carriages creaking, the windows clattering. His head nodded involuntarily in time with the rhythm of the train. He could not get off to sleep, but he was only half awake, and as he sat there a succession of pictures seemed to pass before him—strange, intangible pictures out of the world and the life to which he had dedicated his career. And Yussuf continually stood forth from this variegated Eastern background, his eyes ever

asking the question : ' You are not surely going away for ever ? '

Fontanara made another effort to pull himself together. ' Bah ! What has happened, has happened for the best.' What he wanted now most in the world was to get home. Home ! The mere thought filled his mind suddenly with a measureless, unreasoning longing.

' Home ! ' he said out loud. ' Home ! '

The dragoman awoke again, and in his thick drowsy voice repeated the word ' Home ! '

A friendlier conversation now began between them. Fontanara's longing had struck a chord in the other's heart. He had been born in Asia Minor and had never been to Europe ; there was something in his accent that suggested the Venetian. His father, he explained presently, had been of Austrian origin. He showed that he himself had the vaguest idea as to the difference between Austrians and Italians. All he knew was that his father had come from Italy, and with tears in his voice he insisted yet again on the fact that he was an Italian and a patriot.

This time Fontanara was sympathetic. Impulsively he stretched out his arm and in the dark the two strangers shook hands.

In the small hours of the morning they arrived at Smyrna. Fontanara noted immediately that the news of the outbreak of the war was evidently known there. Nothing else could explain the unwonted life of the town and the patrolling of soldiers through the streets.

' This way, Signore ! ' The dragoman moved along nimbly, showing Fontanara the way.

There was a huge throng of people down by the harbour. Two steamers were making ready to start,

and streams of men moved up and down the quay. Fontanara was wont to trust to his power of looking after himself in such circumstances, but on this occasion he owed it to the dragoman that he was able to embark so soon.

‘Signor Fontanara’s cabin? The famous archaeologist, Signor Fontanara.’

A flurried sailor answered Yes, having first said No. Fontanara found the cabin and with many expressions of gratitude said good-bye to the dragoman. The latter left him in a hesitating sort of way, seeming reluctant to go, and repeatedly turning round, as though he expected something more than this. Fontanara waved his hand to him and shut the cabin door. He was tired out and wanted a couple of hours’ sleep. He had no sooner lain down than it occurred to him that the dragoman’s face had borne an expression of disappointment and something stronger.

He sat up. Now he had a second act of remissness on his conscience. The dragoman—whose name he had not asked—had rendered him a great service, and for all return he had shaken hands with him! He felt thoroughly ashamed of himself for having lost the opportunity of making him some recompense. He could not get the thing off his mind. It was another mistake which he could not make good. But at last he fell asleep.

A quick pattering of feet above his head awoke him suddenly and he rushed on deck. A stiff breeze was blowing. The steamer was already out of the harbour. The coast of Asia Minor was receding—soon it would be lost in the morning mist. The quay was still black with the swarm of men. It was

no longer possible to make out their faces ; but Fontanara pictured to himself the astonishment and anxiety that must be expressed in the eyes of many of his countrymen in the Turkish city.

What, really, was one to think about this war ? Was it politic or even defensible ? The Turks had a crowd of hostages in all the thousands of Italians living in these parts. It seemed to him a senseless, reckless proceeding. Here were all these people of their own flesh and blood placed absolutely at the mercy of an embittered enemy. What was the real meaning of this Tripoli business ? An attempt seemingly to secure by force what otherwise would have come gradually and naturally into the hands of those who were cleverest, most industrious and most persevering. In reality, the entire coast belonged to Europe already. Europeans by their greater efficiency in commerce and industry, their more systematic methods, their greater wealth, had got everything into their own hands. German capitalists were constructing all the railways, French and English steamers carried all the merchandise. Turkey had become a name merely ; the Turkish suzerainty was but an empty word. Slowly but surely all the native inhabitants were being ousted out of all the lucrative employments. The conquest of such a country could have one object alone—that of forestalling and excluding other European rivals.

Fontanara shrugged his shoulders. This war, which in the darkness of the night had come to seem to him a great and glorious undertaking, now in the cold light of dawn began to assume the aspect of a very dubious and hazardous speculation.

He shrank from this view of it. He felt angry with

himself. That was doubtless how Italy's enemies were regarding it. Was it a worthy view for one of her own sons ?

His glance turned again for the last time towards the receding mountains, now a mere blue outline in the far distance, and for a moment all his old feeling for the East came back to him with a rush. He stretched out his arms as towards a cherished friend and his lips gave out the words :

' *A rivederci*, Yussuf Hali ! Come what may to me, we must and shall meet again.'

The Mediterranean was not in the sunny mood of which the poets sing. It was at its roughest. Every now and again an unusually big wave would raise the vessel high in the air ; next moment she seemed to sink into the depths. Fontanara himself did not mind, but the hundreds of other fugitives suffered agonies. They were mostly women and children, for the men had been prevented by business from taking flight as yet.

Fontanara gazed at the passengers between decks. Probably they had friends and relatives waiting at home to welcome them, and for them, if so, the voyage was merely an inconvenience soon to be forgotten. But what of those who could never get away ? They were absolutely at the mercy of the Turks. This reflection kept coming back to him continually. Italy, it would seem, expected the Turks to safeguard the lives and interests of the Italians in their midst. He could not bring himself to believe that their welfare had been lost sight of entirely.

He reflected that he was still in complete ignorance as to the cause of the war. It must surely have been

something serious and compelling. In this twentieth century, no Christian state would embark upon hostilities unless forced by considerations which made any other course impossible.

Tired of trying to solve this problem, of which the factors were unknown to him, he sought out the captain of the steamer. He explained that he had come from the desert, where any newspapers to be seen at all were at least two weeks old, and that he was in absolute ignorance about the war. The commander of a ship plying between the different Mediterranean harbours would probably be well informed on the subject. In a word, What had caused it?

The captain eyed his questioner curiously and replied with a sardonic grin:

‘Your countrymen think they are the stronger. That is always cause enough.’

Fontanara, angered by the tone of the answer, moved away.

The voyage seemed to him unending. He bought heaps of newspapers at the Greek ports at which they touched. His eyes traversed swiftly the columns devoted to the outbreak of the war, but he could find no particulars as to what had brought it about.

Evidently little was known on the subject. Fortunately he would soon be in Italy now. Till then he must only be patient.

At last! They had reached Brindisi. Fontanara landed here though his ticket was for Naples. By taking train direct to Rome he would save two days.

The railway carriage was crammed. He listened attentively to the conversation of his fellow-travellers.

They talked about everything under the sun except the one thing he wanted to hear about. Whenever allusion was, by chance, made to the war, a constrained silence seemed to ensue.

‘People don’t know what to believe,’ was Fontanara’s mental comment. He appealed at last for an opinion to a taciturn man sitting opposite him.

‘We must await developments,’ was his diplomatic reply.

The train rolled along over the familiar country, stopping at stations whose names were well known to him. Passengers left and came. Night was approaching.

‘Early to-morrow I shall be in Rome,’ Fontanara said to himself. There he would be able to feel the pulse of the nation.

His first impression upon arrival was one of astonishment. In spite of his fatigue after the long journey he had decided to make his way to his brother’s house on foot, expecting to see evidences everywhere of the warlike spirit abroad. But there was no sign of it whatever. The flags and the martial music appertaining to it were absent. He walked slowly and looking about him in every direction. It was incredible that there should be no solitary sign of a great war having been begun.

By the time he reached his brother’s house he felt dead-beat.

‘Good morning, Angelo!’

‘What, you! What in the world brings you here?’ Angelo Fontanara put his coffee-cup aside and looked inquiringly at his brother, his senior by three years.

Pietro in reply outlined as briefly as possible the

story of his flight. 'The consul considered it desirable to get me out of the way. And to tell the truth I have been eager to get home, as I heard . . . Tell me, Angelo, what really was the cause of the war?'

'The cause? The less we talk about that the better!'

Pietro Fontanara eyed his brother curiously. Was it with this highly correct government official as with the others—had he also been unable to come to a clear conclusion? Or was it that he preferred not to express it?

Angelo having finished his *petit déjeuner*, threw a glance at the clock and announced that he must be off. War or no war, government officials were expected to get to their work punctually.

The brothers arranged to meet again at noon, and Angelo made ready to start.

'You must regard yourself as absolutely at home in this little dwelling of mine,' he said as he left the house, continuing with a slight flush, 'Perhaps you don't know that I am engaged to be married? I wrote to tell you a week ago, but you can't, of course, have had my letter.' He went on to mention his fiancée's name. Her father, he added, was very rich.

Pietro glanced for a moment after his brother. There was something in Angelo that seemed unfamiliar to him—something he did not relish. He shrugged his shoulders, and sinking into a comfortable arm-chair he looked round the room.

The furniture and general aspect of the room evidenced good taste.

After he had rested a little, he went out for a walk through the city. There seemed to be no change in its

appearance since the hour of his arrival. He spent part of the morning studying the newspapers.

When the brothers met again their conversation was constrained. Angelo was careful what he said. He did not disguise the fact that he was chiefly concerned with his own career, as was only right in a prospective paterfamilias. The war? It was too soon to talk about it. Well, as Pietro was so keen about it . . . it was a strategic move of course—a piece of speculation. If it came off, well and good! . . . If not — h'm! . . . Angelo shrugged his shoulders. Presently he confided to Pietro his intention of going in for politics. As soon as he was married he would have the necessary means . . . Yes, 'it was too soon yet awhile to know what to say about the war.'

Pietro was disinclined to leave the matter there. He made another effort to extract some particulars of the cause of the war.

'The cause?' said Angelo. 'Well, Turkey has neglected to provide herself with a fleet, and we needed something as a set-off against the Abyssinian affair. Our prestige called out for something. Besides our trade required new markets and our capitalists required new regions to exploit. What more do you want in the way of causes?'

Pietro shook his head.

'What I want to know is this—what has Turkey done or failed to do? Has she insulted our flag, has she perpetrated any injustice against any Italian subjects, or has she . . .?'

Angelo burst out laughing.

'Turkey, or rather the Turkish Government, is much too wise to allow anything of the kind to happen. The

Porte was in possession of a province which we wanted. That is the whole story. And I can assure you that if we had not taken it, some one else would have done so. This war really doesn't amount to much more than the winning of a race. As we had begun to fear that other eyes were being directed covetously towards Tripoli, we felt we had to strike at once. It was a question of being first !'

'So it was nothing more than a buccaneering raid ?'

'Your phraseology is not very happy. I am tempted to advise you to avoid such expressions.'

Pietro Fontanara made no reply.

After lunch the brothers parted without any excess of cordiality. Pietro went to look for a hotel, and finding one that suited him, engaged a room. He felt depressed. His return home was not what he had hoped it would be.

The next few days he spent visiting his friends and acquaintances. In the circles in which he moved people maintained an attitude of expectation. Everyone went about his business as usual. The war was treated as a problem in economics. The lawyers in the Chamber of Deputies busied themselves with trying to unravel the threads that the Ministry had tangled together.

Pietro Fontanara listened attentively to all he heard. He found neither enthusiasm nor indignation anywhere.

'All Europe, you see, is looking on with good-humoured approval,' said an old professor who had asked Fontanara many questions as to the result of his excavations in Asia Minor. 'All we really have to be anxious about is the expense.'

‘But we have many tasks to undertake within our own frontiers—tasks involving great expenditure. When shall we set about *them*?’

The old professor gave a shrug of his shoulders.

‘Wars are inevitable,’ he replied. ‘They are inherent in nature, and are in keeping with the law of natural selection. Warfare goes on always and everywhere—it is with the lowest organisms as it is with us. Destiny willed it so, and there is no getting away from it.’

Fontanara returned to his hotel in a thoughtful mood. As he was passing through the vestibule the hotel-keeper came up to speak to him. His son Pietro—same name as the Signore—had just written, or rather the doctor in whose hands he was, had written for him. He was employed as *portier* in a French hotel, but had just been recalled for service in the war. ‘To cut a long story short, Signore, the boy has been and got run over by a motor car and broken a leg and can’t move. Such bad luck at this critical moment in the history of the country!’ The hotel-keeper accompanied this grandiloquent sentence with a dramatic movement of his hands and a mournful shake of the head. But he looked so well content in spite of himself that Fontanara saw how much value there was in his protestations.

‘Really it is too bad,’ the hotel-keeper went on. ‘The lad was so keen on distinguishing himself, and then for this to happen! Of course his return to his regiment is quite out of the question. His poor mother is weeping her eyes out. . . . You are a learned gentleman, Signore; how long would you say it takes for a broken leg to mend? A couple of months? Not

more! . . . By that time the war will be over—poor boy!’

Fontanara made his way up to his bedroom. The hotel-keeper’s ill-concealed delight over his son’s opportune accident pained him. It might not be typical—it proved nothing by itself—but it added to the feeling of disillusionment and disgust which he was experiencing and which he could not shake off. Fortunately there was the Press! The Press was unanimous—the papers of all shades of political opinion were whole-hearted in their enthusiasm.

There was a veritable chorus of triumph when the telegrams arrived bringing news of the first victories, and many thousands who had felt doubtful about the war began to be infected with the elation. The questionable enterprise had received the sanction of success. Doubts and fears and criticism were no longer in place.

There was an uninterrupted run of good news from the front. The Turks were in retreat, the Arabs were coming over to the side of the invaders. Victory was assured. How could any other result have been possible? The swift onslaught of a great, well-equipped army must inevitably overcome the feeble resistance of the meagre forces that the enemy was able to muster. Even in the solitude of his small bedroom, Fontanara could not keep back a ringing ‘*Evviva!*’ as he read the news.

The eldest of the three Fontanaras now arrived home, also unexpectedly. Giuseppe, a manufacturer from the North, was depressed and pessimistic. Pietro went for a walk through the city with him, and Giuseppe profited by the occasion to unburden himself of his anxieties.

'We must have a contract with the army,' he said. 'If we don't get it, it will be a case of shutting up our factories and getting rid of our workmen. Our Eastern business is ruined for ever.'

Pietro looked distressed. Surely his brother was taking too gloomy a view of things?

'For ever!' Giuseppe repeated emphatically. 'The Germans and the English achieve their conquest of the East by peaceful methods. What we Italians had won for ourselves by hundreds of years of work has been thrown away in a single week. The greatest consumer of Italian wares has turned his back on us. The number of millions involved is incalculable. Once the other nations have got hold of the market, they will know how to keep it. When our factories stand idle and thousands of artisans begin to go in procession through the streets, we shall see . . .' He didn't trouble to complete the sentence.

'You will get the contract all right,' said Pietro to keep up his brother's spirits and also his own.

When they had finished their walk, Pietro formed a sudden resolution. He would go for a walking-tour over the Campagna. The sun was shining from a cloudless sky. He stepped out briskly, glad to think of this wide range of broken country, so different from any other he had ever seen. He had known it in childhood, and in his youth he had taken a hand on one occasion in excavations in one part of it.

Soon he had left the walls of Rome behind him. The talk with Giuseppe had intensified his condition of anxiety. It was by war that the greatness of ancient Rome had come about, but was war the right means for building up a modern State? Pietro

regretted that, in devoting his time to researches into the past, he had neglected so much all study of the present.

A breath of wind, moist and cold, from the north, fell now on his left cheek. He stood still a moment and gazed over the green expanse. It occurred to him for the first time to compare in his mind the surroundings of Rome with those of other great cities which he had seen. All those others—even in the far North—had a fringe of outlying villas and parks and gardens, but here, outside the walls of Rome, began a desert. A few ploughed fields, a few acres of clearing, were to be noted, but then the sun shone upon mile after mile of fertile soil in which no seeds germinated, no grain ripened.

On he went, almost as though driven by some force outside himself which he could not resist. He seemed to be on the alert for something—he knew not what; something in the nature of an answer to some unformulated question. Presently by a curving footpath he reached a height which commanded a panoramic view of indescribable beauty. The immense undulating plain spread out before him, richly green. In the far distance the blue mountains, their peaks capped with snow, rose like a gigantic encircling wall. The sun blazed down from the still cloudless sky. Fontanara felt oppressed by the extreme loneliness. Nowhere was there a sign of life; not a note was to be heard. He went on, down the other side of the hill. Not far off he descried a farmyard with some tumbledown buildings. Two skinny hens were pecking in a heap of refuse. The farm was pitiable to look at in its dismal squalor.

He turned away his eyes. Involuntarily he be-thought him of that far-off era when the Roman Campagna was a magnificent pleasure-garden, in which splendid villas built of marble arose amidst the spreading foliage of the trees, and when every inch of the ground was turned to good account and afforded both food and labour to millions of men. And now . . .

He shook his head sadly and gazed along the path which was carried through a ridge. To one side lay a dark cutting that led to a disused quarry. A dozen small lizards frightened by the noise of his footsteps slid away over the slaty ground. He went on more quickly. A dilapidated bridge took him over the dried-up course of a stream. The stones still holding together, which had upborne pedestrians and vehicles for more than two thousand years, looked as though they might defy time and neglect for a long while yet. To the right the mighty arches of the ancient aqueduct traversed the undulating plain. Fontanara's sense of solitude was stronger than ever. He longed for the sight of a man, for the sound of a human voice. At every turning of the path he looked eagerly round. But he met no one, not a single being was to be seen. Far away he descried some sheep grazing, but there was no sign of a shepherd.

Such solitude as this within an hour's walk of the capital was almost weird. Fontanara went on, ever hastening his steps. The thought that no living creature crossed his path or followed behind him urged him on.

At last, after walking for several hours, he came upon a dilapidated-looking inn. He heaved a sigh of

relief. Now, at last, he became conscious of weariness in his limbs and that the perspiration was streaming down his cheeks. He felt he would like to rest a little. The white wine of the country would be refreshing.

An untidily dressed woman came to take his order and brought him a carafe and a tumbler, somewhat chipped. He peered into the ill-lighted rooms. The dirt and disorder baffled description. A number of frightened hens went clattering out of the open door. There was a continual buzzing of flies from the ceiling. The close atmosphere of the house was impregnated with the smell from a cattle-shed adjoining it. Pietro took a sip of the sour wine, then, discovering finger-marks on the tumbler, put it down, and strode out. The woman seemed to take no offence.

He went across the courtyard to the pathway again. A small black pig was tied by one of his hind-legs to a peg. On the other side of a stone wall some hundreds of sheep were grazing. Right in front of the entrance was a dung-heap. As Fontanara made off to the right, a couple of half-naked little children ran up to him and stretched out their hands for alms. They had not all the assurance of beggars in the city, but they were just as persistent. In order to get rid of them he threw them a *soldo*. It was accepted in silence, but it only let loose a dozen other childish pesterers of all ages. Almost without utterance, but with outstretched hands and covetous eyes, they kept on running alongside the stranger in the hope of his throwing them another coin. He found it a painful experience. All these pairs of hungry eyes, all these unwashed little hands, belonged to Italians. Their poor wizened faces looked prematurely old—old and

without hope, and yet how desperately and perseveringly they stretched out their hands! He supposed they did so from force of habit—they had been taught to do it.

Presently he came to a row of huts made of rushes which looked like shelters for sheep or goats. Pietro stood still a moment, thinking. Surely he had seen these before. In these hovels human beings made their home. The walls afforded hardly any protection against the wind, the rain could stream in through the roofs, grass and bits of rag served for flooring. In the centre burnt the fire, the smoke from which found an outlet as best it might. In each of these dreadful dwellings lived a whole family. Therein children were born. Therein the sick and the old met their death.

Pietro shut his eyes, horror-struck at the sight. Opening them again, he gazed reflectively in the direction of Rome. In the East he had witnessed many things that had aroused his indignation and disgust, but nothing to equal this. Pulling out his purse, he scattered all the silver and copper it contained upon the path.

The children retreated a little, startled by his manner, some of the smallest scuttling away into the huts. The bigger boys stood on the defensive, the girls were ready for flight, in case this stranger should become violent. It took them a few moments to understand that the money was really for them. Then they all made darts for the coins in every direction, still without word or cry. Their whole aspect, but their strange voicelessness above all, produced so painful an impression upon his mind that Pietro hastened

away. Glancing back over his shoulder, he noted that a woman with a baby at her breast was standing at the opening of one of the huts nearest to him. She was gazing astonished at the silent struggle going on between the children. Seeing what they were about she hastened to join them in order to get her share of the loot. She secured a coin which had rolled to one side of the path. With her lower jaw projecting and her whole countenance expressing amazement, she stood staring after the stranger. Her eyes kept turning from him to the coin in her hand and back to him. She evidently thought he must be weak-minded. This idea awakening in her perhaps some feeling of insecurity in regard to her spoil, she hurried away into her hut, letting the cloth which did service as a door fall down behind her.

Pietro clenched his fists. A shudder ran through him. In front of him, high up on a hill, stood Gabii. He made the ascent as rapidly as he could, following a little-used footpath through a cut maize-field. Soon he found himself standing among the ruins of the ancient temple of Juno. Three bare walls of hewn stone were all that survived of a populous city, older than Rome. Its streets and houses and market-place lay hidden beneath the soil from which the crops now growing drew their nourishment. The archæologist in Fontanara began to dream of buried marvels, and for a few seconds he forgot the troubles of the present. But a single glance into the valley sufficed to bring him back into reality. There lay the huts made of rushes in which men of his own proud era lived their lives. The Italians had done scant justice to their great inheritance.

He laughed out loud, harshly and bitterly, as his thoughts went back to the war—this war waged against ‘barbarians’ in the interests of ‘civilisation’! Of ‘civilisation,’ with these men and women of Italian blood dragging out their existence in hovels and under conditions of wretchedness worse than anything to be seen in native villages in Africa!

He could not rid his mind of those half-famished, silent creatures to whom he had thrown the coins.

‘That malaria!’ he kept saying to himself. His cheeks flushed, and his eyes grew bright with scorn. The country had not money to keep off the treacherous sickness, but it could find the means for a buccaneering raid. The once fertile Campagna could not be reclaimed, because this would require sums which had to be expended upon warships.

Millions were being squandered on the subjugation of a friendly race; while the sons of the soil were the victims of misery and starvation. A passage from Aleardi’s poems came into his mind, and he recited it to himself out loud:

‘In every furrow of our sphere there grows a sombre plant—Death. When the earth in summer-time lies drowsily silent, surfeited with the sun’s rays, thousands of reapers, driven by the pangs of hunger, appear upon the scene, coming forth like condemned souls. Their eyes become dimmed by the poisonous vapours amidst which they move, and no bird uplifts its voice to gladden their hearts. No note of the songs they knew in their mountain homes in the Abruzzi brightens their sad wanderings. In silence, they reap the crops of their unknown masters, and, when at last

their wearying work is done, they go, as they came, in silence.'

The thought of the war obsessed him, and vainly he struggled against his feelings of mistrust and doubt. Was it really conceivable that the Italian Government proposed to transform the deserts of Tripoli into cultivated land, while suffering the pestilential area of the Campagna to remain in the condition in which it had been so long ?

The wind blew freely up on this height by the ancient temple. How refreshing it was ! Pietro uncovered his head.

A squad of labourers were making their way down the path. Gloomily, silently ; their heads bent ; women as well as men. Their eyes on the ground ; their footsteps slow and heavy. These were the occupants of the huts. Behind them rode an overseer with a fowling-piece slung on his back and carrying a long pike in one hand.

What Aleardi had described, a hundred years before, was happening still to-day.

There was a ringing in his ears, and, involuntarily, he raised his hands to Heaven. His soul rebelled against a state of things that permitted such evils to exist in this sun-kissed land of Italy.

The squad of labourers had disappeared in a hollow of the hill ; only the overseer, with his gun and pike, was now to be seen. Like a procession of the dead, they came into sight again, then disappeared finally behind the huts. The overseer rode on alone to the inn.

Pietro clenched his teeth, and, his hat still in his

hand, set forth in the same direction as the labourers. 'My countrymen!' he exclaimed out loud, and the words sounded in his own ears like an impeachment.

As he drew near to the huts in which these sad and tongue-tied wretches found their refuge, all the make-shift doors seemed to have been carefully closed. Everything was as still as the grave; but Pietro had a feeling that he was being watched by countless eyes through chinks and fissures. Here he was again!—this extraordinary stranger, who had actually thrown coins about on the road! It was safer for them to keep quietly indoors lest, having evidently lost his way, he should suddenly begin to repent of his generosity!

With swift steps he set out on his return to the capital. What he had witnessed, he assured himself, was nothing wonderful, really, and was in no way a discovery. He himself, on his tramps abroad over the Campagna, had often seen these herds of silent, weary, fever-stricken men. Every traveller who broke away at all from the high roads was bound to come across them. But to-day the sight of them had moved him as never before. He realised the reason. Against the background formed by the war, the dreadful-ness of all this stood out more sharply. Why squander millions upon a dubious—perhaps, unrighteous and ignoble—war, while denying succour to these unfortunates who could not help themselves? It was not resignation in face of a cruel destiny that had stamped these folk with the character they bore on their faces: it was an unreasoning stupidity, passed on from generation to generation, that kept them in subjection, in the absence of all that could make life bearable.

He recalled some words that he had come across in

a newspaper—a passage from a speech, so well as he could remember, delivered by a member of the English Government :

‘ It is my sincere conviction that a better understanding between the nations is quite possible. . . . Taxation could be made less burdensome, and the money that could be saved upon armaments could be expended upon the development of the country and the amelioration of the lot of the people. The cornerstone of finance is Peace on Earth and greater good-will amongst men ! ’

‘ What is war ? ’ Pietro asked himself. ‘ How is it we tolerate this nightmare which stands in the way of progress, of happiness, of all that is worth most in life, which is, in truth, life’s bitterest enemy ? What is the explanation ? There must be one. What were men taught to think about it by Buddha and Plato and, above all, by Christ ? ’

He gave it up ; he would not weary his brain with it any longer. It was hopeless. With a bitter laugh, he quoted Virgil’s saying about the turmoil of war being silenced, and the Age of Brass becoming still. A false prophet, Virgil ! The turmoil of war refuses to be silenced, and the Age of Brass remains brazen.

Fontanara hurried along, as though seeking to outrun his gloomy thoughts. But there was no escaping from them. Again and again he asked himself : ‘ What is war ? What is war ? ’

At last he felt he could no longer bear it. ‘ I must find the answer for myself,’ he said. ‘ At all costs, I must find the answer for myself—at all costs ! I must learn ! ’

His mind became quieter. It seemed to him, almost,

as though something had germinated in him that would yield the solution. He walked more slowly, squaring his shoulders and holding his head erect.

The Porta Maggiore came in sight. In a few minutes he would be back in Rome. He brushed the dust off his boots and buttoned up his coat.

It was dark when he entered the city. His excitement had died down, and he felt tired and hungry. He looked about for a café. A cup of hot coffee was, perhaps, the best thing he could take first.

He stepped into the first café he found, and sank down upon a chair and gave his order. In his keen, brown eyes there was a look of strange intentness. He sat with his head leaning forward, as though listening to voices which were not yet uttering the word for which he was on the alert. His whole figure bent, his fists clenched and resting upon his knee, he looked the incarnation of concentrated thought. Suddenly the spell was broken. It was as though his brain had been set free.

‘I shall go myself to the war!’

He spoke the words out loud.

The waiter, approaching with the coffee, stared at him. Fontanara met his glance and repeated:

‘I shall go myself . . . I shall go as a volunteer!’

He drank off his black coffee, boiling hot; put a lira on the table, stood up, and went out. ‘I must learn what war is,’ he murmured. ‘I must learn what war is.’

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‘Fontanara! I hope you clearly understand that . . . er . . . that sort of slackness, when on duty,

is not allowed ? You have a rifle and cartridges so that you may use them. And, although the enemy was within range, you just lay there . . . er . . . and gaped at him. This time I'll let it pass . . . er . . . but don't let it happen again !' Captain Vitale threw out his chest and looked severely at the offender. He liked this six-foot recruit who possessed both culture and intelligence ; but, all the same, he could not let such a flagrant piece of negligence pass unproved.

Private Zirilli gave a slight mocking cough. His comrade and chum, Rapagnotti, looked down sullenly. The faces of the others expressed nothing but curiosity.

' As I said . . . er . . . I hope you will manage better next time.' Captain Vitale nodded kindly. He was anxious to modify the severity of his reproof.

Pietro Fontanara stood in the stiff position prescribed by the regulations, and looked his commanding officer straight in the eyes. He admitted to himself that he was in fault. He had known it even as he had lowered his rifle, and simply gazed in astonishment at the creatures who had suddenly appeared a few hundred yards away and had immediately disappeared behind a sheltering sand-dune. The red fezzes betrayed them as enemies, and shots immediately began to ring out. Pietro Fontanara alone had remained idle. It is true that he had instinctively seized his weapon and aimed at the Turks whom they had surprised. But, before he could shoot, a thought had flashed through his mind : ' Thou shalt do no murder ! ' It rang like a trumpet-call in a mighty warning. The rifle sank in the same instinctive manner in which it had been raised a moment before. As he stood before Captain Vitale, he only remembered the confusion he

had felt. His comrades were shooting on either side of him ; far away the enemy answered in like manner. Then the men who were opposite to them ran off with bent backs ; they sprang into a hollow, bent round a sand-hill and were out of sight. At his right hand Zirilli was still firing with nervous energy. He did not cease until Rapagnotti gave him an emphatic dig in the ribs, and then he looked round. He had the look of a man who suddenly awakes from a heavy sleep. His eyes glanced in all directions with an unsteady and uncomprehending expression, his whole body was trembling. The most remarkable thing was that Fontanara knew that he himself had the selfsame appearance.

On his return the patrol leader reported Fontanara's conduct, as was his duty.

Captain Vitale swung round on his left heel and disappeared. After taking a few steps an idea occurred to him.

'Fontanara !' he called, over his shoulder.

'Captain.'

'You understand that it is not for my own pleasure . . . that it happens . . . You . . . I . . . Oh ! . . . Well . . . You understand.'

Pietro laughed somewhat feebly but in a friendly way.

'For my part I can understand that the affair strikes you as rather unusual. You are a novice as yet, and the others have often been under fire. But you have the honour to belong to a regiment that has distinguished itself in many ways, and, eh ? . . . You are a first-rate shot . . . Yes ? . . . Ah ! . . . h'm . . . *Addio !*'

Pietro returned to the troops, who were lying in the shade of a steep sand-dune. The corporal who had reported him looked across at him through his half-closed eyelids. When he heard how mildly the captain judged this Fontanara he drew his own conclusions. Apparently it would be to his advantage to close his eyes to the vagaries of this long recruit. But Zirilli ostentatiously turned his back on him. He could not stand this puppy who had come to play at war and to make himself important at the cost of old soldiers. His friend Rapagnotti looked at Pietro with sly disfavour. Had it been he who had behaved in this way, there would have been a regular storm. It was unjust to make such a difference between comrades. He kicked the sand angrily and muttered a curse.

Pietro lay down full length on the ground ; he was tired and wanted to sleep. But the moment he closed his eyes his brain began to work. He did not regret the impulse which had driven him to the war. The certainty which he demanded and which was a necessity to him was no more in the unattainable distance. He felt its nearness ; perhaps the next hour would give it him. But, nevertheless . . . Like pictures on an endless film, memories and impressions, events and personalities of the last few months, flashed past him in a giddy whirl.

He recollected the astonishment, the horror even, of his relations and friends over what they called an unfortunate business, and smiled at the thought of the press notices about the celebrated archæologist Pietro Fontanara having resolved to go to the front as a volunteer. He could not repress a feeling of bitterness

against this distinction which had come upon him so suddenly. Fontanara, who until then had only been noticed by a small learned circle, had suddenly become popular, and his two works were in great demand at the booksellers'. It seemed to him that there was a hint of bitterness in this enthusiasm. If that which he held as simply his duty was in reality a great deed, why did not many another follow his example? If there was really something worth recording in the fact that a strong man, healthy in mind and body, hurried to the aid of his country, then it was a proof that war was an out-of-date ideal.

In the meanwhile he was not allowed much time for meditation. Day by day he marched round and round a dusty barrack yard. He made ceaseless movements which he could do already, repeated exercises the uses of which he could not understand. When it came to serious business he would have no time to repeat what he had learned: a number of external events, which no one could foresee, would determine his actions. In private Pietro said as much to the lieutenant who drilled his recruits so untiringly. The young man did not even understand what the recruit meant. The exercises were written in the Army Regulations, therefore they must be right. With the burning ardour of blind enthusiasm the lieutenant embraced these Regulations. Their usefulness must not be disputed; criticisms were forbidden. In consideration of the position of the tall recruit, so much older than his comrades, he did not take offence at his remark, but he thought it right to warn him off such forbidden thoughts.

'Dogmas,' thought Pietro at the conclusion of

the short conversation. He was an educated man and could guess at the horror of the young leader over the rising doubts of the subordinate. These conscientious officers had something of the religious zeal of the clergy. They believed blindly in their task and preached its doctrines with true fanaticism. With passionate earnestness the young lieutenant hammered at the drills with his recruit, and the corporals automatically nailed down all those innumerable details which go to make a finished soldier. As Pietro realised that his brain was gradually being emptied of its former knowledge, whilst other knowledge, which seemed to him unessential, was being put in its place, he began to understand. The gigantic machinery which had seized him in its grip, along with the others, overawed him. For the present he bowed down to physical weariness, but cherished the doubt as his most precious possession.

At the end of November the company had embarked. The voyage had been quick and successful.

The first impression of the province, for the possession of which his country was making so great a sacrifice, was depressing. Through pouring rain the company marched past shuttered houses, through streets in which no living soul was visible. The town lay as though dead. Silent and sulky the men waded on through wet and mud.

The first sight to meet their eyes before the gates of the city was a row of gallows. The corpses dangling from them swayed hither and thither with the wind and the water dripped from them in a melancholy way. Pietro had not the slightest doubt but that the dead had been criminals, though he was somewhat surprised

that his compatriots should employ a method of punishment unknown in Italy.

Some few days later he read in one of the newspapers which had been distributed among the men, that the hanging had made a deep impression upon the Arabs. 'It is a degrading punishment, which locks the dead outside the gates of Paradise. On the other hand, shooting is regarded as the death of a hero, which is rewarded by Mohammed and the Prophets with everlasting glory on the other side of the grave.'

Pietro laughed on reading this official statement. Besides the unforgivable slip, 'Mohammed and the Prophets,' the notice was wrong from beginning to end. In the time of Mohammed there were no such things as firearms, and neither in the Koran nor in any other Arabic writings of a more or less sacred nature is there any intimation that any particular mode of death is thought dishonourable. These naïve lies in a report which would be published throughout the world would be sure to arouse offence. The spreading of such reports, which anyone could contradict, was obviously absurd. With his intimate knowledge of the East and its people Pietro could not help thinking that in some cases the punishment had been severe, even perhaps unjust. Well, the haste with which all must be accomplished in war explained a possible error, even if it did not excuse it. The pressure of unexpected and unforeseen events hastened the verdicts and made them irrevocable. The law of warfare is different from that of peace.

The deserted, dirty town, and the gallows with their dangling, dripping corpses, were a lasting remembrance to Pietro Fontanara.

The two hundred soldiers who arrived on that dreary November day were destined for a *bersaglieri* regiment stationed on the south-west of the town of Tripoli. The reserves were divided among the different companies, the 7th, which had distinguished itself in many ways, receiving the largest number.

‘Fontanara!’ At this name Captain Vitale paused in the roll-call. ‘“Marksman” stands against your name,’ he said. ‘Give a proof of your skill.’

Pietro asked for a playing-card. An officer had a pack of cards and was ready to sacrifice it. Pietro at once fixed a five of spades to the trunk of a palm. From a distance of twenty paces he shot, one after the other, the five black spots from out of the card.

‘Excellent!’ cried Captain Vitale, louder than usual. ‘You could join . . . er . . . a circus.’

Pietro smiled faintly and explained that he had practised shooting daily. When one had passed a long time in a wilderness devoid of human society as he had done, one was forced to seek distractions of this kind. Some days he had fired a hundred shots. If one of his comrades cared to hold the card between his fingers he would divide it across.

‘What are you?’ asked Captain Vitale, beaming. ‘I mean what is your occupation?’ ‘Archæology,’ he repeated, when Pietro had told him. ‘Archæology . . . oh, a scholar. Well, after all it does not matter.’ His voice was kind, almost soothing. Pietro’s smile had vanished. He looked down thoughtfully. Suddenly Captain Vitale’s left hand struck him heavily on the shoulder, his right was held out for a cordial grip.

‘Welcome, comrade! We need such as you.’

Half an hour later Pietro belonged to the first

half of the second section. On account of his stature his place was that of the front-rank man on its extreme right. That was a post of honour, for the men in this half-section were all distinguished soldiers whose courage and bravery had often been proved. Next to him Pietro had a slender youth who held himself almost limply. But he soon showed that he was but resting when standing so slackly. He was as lithe as a cat, and when he moved away he seemed to glide noiselessly over the ground. He told Pietro that his name was Zirilli and that he had already been under fire several times.

‘I was in the great bayonet charge last month,’ he explained, and threw out his chest. ‘You should have seen the Arabs run. But we were quicker. Rapagnotti, behind me there, was with us too. He is a regular spitfire. He was always in the middle of it all and hit out like a lunatic. Afterwards we discovered that the butt-end of his rifle was covered with blood and great tufts of hair. He can . . .’

‘Shut up!’ interrupted Rapagnotti, grumpily, and gave the talkative Zirilli a shove with his knee.

‘I saw it with my own eyes,’ said the latter in self-defence. And, thinking he saw a slight smile round the corners of Pietro’s lips, he added hotly: ‘I have an illustrated paper in my knapsack. There is a splendid picture of our bayonet charge in it. You see, I was once in a printing office and so I know all about these things. Pictures are nicer than reading, don’t you think? Isn’t your name Fontanara or something? As soon as we are off duty, I’ll show you the picture.’

Pietro took no heed of the chatter, but glanced over his shoulder at Rapagnotti. It did not seem at all

unlikely that the broad-shouldered, somewhat bent man, with his gigantic hands, should be a formidable opponent.

From Rapagnotti he turned to his other comrades. It was a long row of faces, and in each was mirrored the soul of a free man. How did he come upon such thoughts? They were, one and all, here to obey others who, again, obeyed those above them.

Fontanara had a feeling that the problem over which he pondered so deeply grew more difficult and more complicated as he studied it. But at the same time he was strengthened in his determination not to allow himself to be scared from anything which brought him nearer to his goal. With utmost zeal, therefore, he seized the first opportunity of making new observations. When the reconnoitring patrol was sent out he followed the corporal with hasty steps, and when the enemy appeared he thought 'Is this the answer?' But the experience by which he was the richer was not that which he had anticipated.

After this came the half-friendly, half-indulgent reproof, which probably hurt the good Vitale who administered it more than him who received it.

'He knows he is doing his duty,' thought Pietro, whilst he lay motionless, with closed eyes, on the sand. 'If only I were just as certain about my duty. . . !'

Even before his arrival Pietro had heard the regiment to which he now belonged spoken of with admiration and respect; and if any portion of it had been specially praised it had been Company No. 7. It had been through hard times, as was proved by the many gaps in its ranks. The two lieutenants had

been sent home—one a cripple, the other to be shut up in a lunatic asylum.

‘They say he is incurable,’ said Zirilli when he told the story to Pietro. ‘Overstrain, or some such stuff. But he was a regular schoolgirl . . . no good for this sort of thing.’

But Captain Vitale was a better sort of man. At first the men were afraid of him; now they loved him. He cared for them like a father, shared the hardships of the soldiers, guided and instructed them without sparing himself. Pietro had already made up his mind about the man, and gave but scant attention to the chatter of his comrades.

‘Look here,’ Zirilli broke in, ‘I’ve never shown you those illustrations. You wait: you’re going to see something fine.’ He drew from the inner pocket of his tunic a folded piece of newspaper. ‘I’ll always carry it about with me in future. There! Well? What price that, eh?’

They were lying flat on their stomachs, on a high sand-dune, overlooking the whole neighbourhood. Pietro shifted a little nearer so as to look at the sheet which his comrade had unfolded.

It was a half-page picture from an illustrated journal. The first thing that struck one was an Arab in a white *burnous* on horseback, who was in the act of falling over. Around him were grouped other Arabs, brandishing swords or shooting with rifles and pistols of a very unpractical and antiquated pattern. Trim *bersaglieri* were fighting in their midst. They were parrying the sword-thrusts, firing, stabbing with the bayonet. Their bearing was faultless, their uniforms were elegant, the plumes in their hats waved in the

breeze ; everything about them aroused the impression of overwhelming power and triumphant victory.

Fontanara shrugged his shoulders ; he had seen pictures of this nature before.

‘ Do you believe me now ? ’ asked Zirilli, rejoicing in the vivid drawing ; and he pointed to the underline—‘ Our regiment . . . ; the date. There, read for yourself ! ’

It was as he said. The illustration was intended to represent the regiment’s famous bayonet charge. Pietro remembered having questioned one or two officers about it, and that they had been honest enough to tell him that no hand-to-hand fight had taken place ; and here lay one of those who had taken part in the battle, who was ready to give any number of details about it in his own way.

If Pietro had told him that the officer, whom he was bound to believe and obey, had denied all this, he would have offended Zirilli deeply. What an artist, probably hundreds of miles from the scene of action, had imagined and put together on his drawing-board was a definite proof, whereas his own observations had faded from his memory.

Pietro glanced sideways at the soldier. There was no sense in undeceiving him. He would have laid his hand unhesitatingly on the cross and sworn that the drawing represented the truth ; and thousands of his comrades would do likewise. Pietro stared thoughtfully out over the bare country. It began to dawn on him with what an incredible number of lies war, and everything connected with war, was surrounded. Old, half-formed thoughts and new ideas crowded confusedly in his mind.

‘The Campagna and its poverty . . . Bah! Hundreds of people die of starvation every year in London and other cities.’ This war was just exactly the same as all the others. His countrymen were guilty of no worse a blunder than any other nations might perpetrate at any moment . . .

Zirilli had crawled away from his unresponsive companion and lay beside Rapagnotti. The latter said to him in his sulky voice :

‘He’s stuck up. Best hold your tongue!’

The sun set quickly in the west, and darkness crept over from the east. A blood-red disc, the lower part of which was hidden by a hill, and the upper edge cut off by a blue-black cloud, shed a sinister light on the horizon.

‘To what have the nations attained?’ thought Fontanara, his eyes fixed on the setting sun. ‘They have built a prison for themselves, splendid in its monumental height, terrible in its oppressive strength. They are unhappy in it and they suffer. And yet they sacrifice their lives, their happiness, the future of their children, so as to live in it. And why have they built this penitentiary? Not that it may benefit themselves, but that it may harm others. And in this prison-school the generations have to learn the impossible: they must learn to settle by physical force the conflict which intellect alone should decide.’

The upper edge of the sun’s disc vanished behind the hill, darkness prevailed. As the last dying ray of light trembled across the blue-black cloud, a light dawned in the depths of the inquirer’s soul. The light of an inspiration flashed across the darkness. Dimly, nay clearly, he saw the way before him. The unfinished

thought, born as he walked in the Campagna, grew and took shape. . . .

‘Are you writing?’ Captain Vitale looked down at the note-book in Pietro’s hand.

‘A few thoughts and observations,’ replied the soldier, rising.

‘A new book . . . eh?’ Vitale screwed up one eye and looked at him humorously with the other. ‘I won’t disturb you.’ He nodded kindly and walked on, smiling.

Pietro shut up his note-book and put it in his pocket. He followed with his eyes the fine figure of the commanding officer. If the book of which he was now dreaming ever saw the light, Captain Vitale would receive the praise which he had earned in full measure.

The captain had turned again, and was standing once more before Pietro.

‘Fontanara, it has just occurred to me. You are collecting observations . . . eh? You want to see and learn. Very well! In the course of the next week the battalion will be withdrawn from the front . . . to rest . . . eh! You understand. I will arrange that you are on guard at headquarters. Keep your eyes open! Eh! You may count on that. . . .’

It was in this way that, a few days later, Pietro was given his post at the headquarters Intelligence Department. On his left came up a straight, broad staircase, divided into two flights of steps. At the top there was a large hall, in which half a dozen staff officers were always to be found. Pietro was posted at a doorway between the stairs and the room. Every now and then

an orderly went by, handed a dispatch to one of the officers, and went out again. The officer who had received the dispatch hurried through one of the four doors of the hall into one of the rooms where work was in hand. Sometimes officers or officials of higher rank came in, who asked a question of the first aide-de-camp they came across, or else went straight to one of the doors and disappeared through it. Some of them got through their business in five minutes, others remained a long time. When anyone of this kind passed him, Pietro brought his rifle to his side and stood stiffly with his heels clicked together. Nobody noticed him; he was something impersonal, a thing, a decoration.

He noticed that one of the doors in the large hall had remained closed ever since he had been at his post.

The comrade whom he had relieved half an hour ago had whispered ' Arabs ' to him, at the same time making a gesture in the direction of the closed door. Pietro had blinked his eyes to show that he understood. He concluded that the tall, one-eyed native, who had remained modestly in a corner all this time, was one of the above-mentioned Arabs. His eyes rested for a few seconds on the foreigner in his long robe with its many folds. The man was obviously waiting for some one. Pietro saw nothing interesting in him, except perhaps his quick, shifty glance.

Orderlies came and went. Staff-officers came forward in turn for their dispatches. That none of these contained anything important was to be gathered from their indifferent bearing. The whole business was just the thing which had to be done, and to which everyone had to accustom himself.

Two red fezzes at the foot of the staircase suddenly attracted Pietro's attention. He was not mistaken, they were really Turkish officers. Under the escort of a major of cavalry they came slowly up the stairs. Pietro was able to observe these two enemies at his leisure.

The one, apparently a captain, was tall and slight and held himself upright and a little stiffly. His companion and superior officer was small, somewhat stout, and badly made. The expression of his face was almost too stupid to be natural. Knowing nothing about the man, not even his rank, Pietro had the feeling that he was dangerous. His stupid face was a mask, behind which lurked something very different. The sentry stood, according to regulations, stiffly upright and looked unblinkingly at the Turks as they went by. The short stout man met his gaze, and taking it to be a salute acknowledged it condescendingly.

'Under a flag of truce!' reported the cavalry officer.

The officers bowed stiffly, the orderlies stood to attention. Only the Arab crept farther back into his corner as though he would like to hide himself. When he realised that this was impossible he turned his back to the room.

The two Turks stopped at the door. The cavalryman invited them to come in, but the stout man declined.

'Thank you . . . no . . . as you see, I can speak your beautiful language,' he said in broken Italian. Then he continued in Turkish, without looking at his companion. 'Keep your eyes open! Count the ships in the harbour! And anything else worth noting . . .

take it all in ! ' The smile had not vanished from his lips for a second, and in the same breath he turned to the cavalryman, explaining, ' Fermal Bey understands no other language but our own. I was saying to him that we could not by any chance have had a more courteous guide than yourself.' This time he spoke fluently in French.

' Oh Major Assan . . . ! ' The flattered cavalryman smiled, well pleased.

' Shall we have to wait long before the general . . . ? '

' I shouldn't think so. What is your business ? ' A captain of infantry who heard the question came forward and shook the major by the hand.

' The wounded in the district south of Ain-Zara,' the latter explained to him.

' Oh ! ' The infantry captain shrugged his shoulders. ' A six-hours' armistice, eh ? ' And, as Major Assan nodded, he went on : ' I imagine the answer will be " No ! " We are to push forward without a halt, and . . . ' He stopped suddenly, bit his lip, and moved away.

The cavalry officer shook his head regretfully ; an officer, near by, coughed impressively.

Pietro understood. The infantryman had let something slip out which the enemy was not intended to hear. His countrymen tried to cover up his blunder by their easy manner, and they were, apparently, successful. Major Assan's face never altered from its dull, good-natured expression. But his companion was not quick enough to hide his delighted surprise from Pietro's searching gaze.

' He understands French,' was Pietro's first thought. ' So the other one was lying when he said

he knew no other language but Turkish,' was his second. Pietro determined not to let the envoys out of his sight.

'Keep a good-look out!' said Major Assan plainly, in his mother-tongue, to his companion. And, with the same charming good humour, he turned to the cavalryman on his other side and said: 'Perhaps I am talking to you too much, am I? But, you see, we are under a truce now, and I am taking the opportunity to practise a little. You never know what may be in store for you, either in peace or in war.' He laughed heartily at his own pleasantry, showing two uneven rows of yellow teeth.

The door which had been shut for so long was opened, and a white-robed Bedouin came out.

'Gentlemen!' The cavalryman signed to the Turks to come with him whilst he went on in front.

The Bedouin, whose bearing and appearance were those of a powerful sheikh, strode slowly across the room. As he passed the Turkish officers, the captain stood still and looked him straight in the eyes with a challenging expression. The Bedouin did not return his gaze, neither did he avoid it; he went quietly by as though he had not noticed the unaccustomed visitor at all.

The Turkish captain turned half round towards the Bedouin and it seemed as though he was about to say something.

'If you please, captain!'

The cavalryman's words brought the Turk back to himself. He smiled rather constrainedly, bowed, and went on.

Major Assan was already standing by the open door.

‘You stay here, Fermal Bey!’ he said over his shoulder. And, as he saw that the cavalryman was somewhat taken aback at this command, he whispered confidentially to him: ‘He wouldn’t understand a word of what we were saying.’

The cavalry officer smiled with his usual suavity, stood aside for the major to go in, and entered behind him. The door was closed.

The Bedouin sheikh had reached the staircase. The Arab, who had been waiting all this time in his corner, glided to him behind the Turk’s back. He looked at the other, who was obviously his master, with a question in his eyes.

‘No!’ said the Bedouin haughtily, in Arabic, quite certain that no one but his companion could understand him. ‘They are neither strong nor clever. Let them waste their strength. I bide my time.’ He went with slow, dignified steps down the stairs. A sigh broke from the one-eyed man. It seemed to Pietro that it was a sigh of relief. He looked after the two men. The sheikh carried his head high and had a springing step. Something majestic in his bearing was combined with a cat-like suppleness of movement, and his proud, calm features contrasted strangely with the sly, watchful expression in his eyes. The one-eyed man shuffled behind him in his yellow slippers, humbly and with bowed shoulders.

‘I believe that’s Ibn Hamkal,’ said the captain who had allowed the unfortunate remark to escape from him a little before. ‘Sheikh of the Beni So-and-So. He’s sure to be a valuable ally. A thousand horsemen of all kinds don’t amount to much, I admit. But, then, there’s the example. You see, there’s the example.’

He held forth at length on the power of example, and the officer, to whom he was pouring out his words of wisdom, listened to him patiently.

Pietro glanced round the room. The Turkish captain was standing at the end, by a window, from which he had a splendid view over the Roads. He was, apparently, sunk in thought. Pietro looked at the officers standing round. Ought he not to let them know that the envoy understood French and, probably, Italian as well? But supposing he were mistaken . . . what then? They were all talking in their own language. Was he not doing wrong to keep silence? He took a step forward. A staff-officer whom he had not seen before hurried up the stairs and threw a stern glance as he passed at the careless sentry, who had forgotten to salute.

Pietro returned hastily to his post, and stood rigidly in the prescribed position. It was not Pietro Fontanara who was standing there: it was no seeing, thinking man, but an insignificant, easily replaced part of a mighty piece of machinery which worked without any assistance from him.

Before Fontanara could make up his mind, the Turkish major returned. The captain hurried to meet him.

‘Did you see?’ He nodded towards the stairs.

‘Our friend Djafar? Of course I did. There are allies that you would rather see siding with your enemy.’ He laughed light-heartedly, and, as he had no notion that the sentry in the doorway understood Turkish, he added unconcernedly: ‘You’ve had a good look . . .? That’s right!’

Accompanied by the cavalryman they walked

across the hall. Those who were present followed them with their eyes.

‘Of course not,’ continued Major Assan regretfully. And in a tone of voice calculated entirely to mislead his listeners, who did not understand Turkish, he added : ‘I have found out what I wanted to know. Their expenses now run up to two millions a day. In future we will only have to carry on the war in routine fashion.’

The three officers descended the stairs, and the major explained to the cavalry officer that he had told his comrade the disappointing reply he had just received. At the top step of the flight the little Turk stopped for a moment and looked back. A look of hatred, triumph and malice flashed from him up to the large room, in which nobody, except the sentry, was giving the envoy another thought. After having raised the mask for a second, the major turned round and said conversationally to the cavalryman at his side : ‘In these days it is not enough to be a soldier : one has to know something of diplomacy and business as well.’

The major smiled deprecatingly. He did not share his enemy’s opinion in the slightest, but he was too polite to disagree with him.

That flashing glance had strengthened Pietro’s resolution.

‘Sir !’

The infantry officer who had made the blunder stopped short in his pacing, and stared in amazement at the sentry. ‘Is the fellow speaking, or have I gone mad ?’ his look seemed to say.

‘Sir !’ Pietro repeated, ‘the Turk who was waiting

out here understood French, and I think he probably knew Italian too.'

'What! . . . how do you know?'

'I know Turkish . . . and Arabic.'

Several officers drew near, so as to listen to the conversation.

'What did you hear?' the infantryman asked curiously.

'First of all he told his companion to keep his eyes and ears open.'

The officers nodded.

'Nothing more?' said the infantry officer, and shrugged his shoulders. He took stock of the sentry, saw that he had an intelligent face, and added: 'You concluded that they were spies. That sort of thing cannot be helped. The conditions of modern warfare permit that . . . under certain circumstances.' And, as he liked the look of the handsome fellow in the doorway, he added didactically: 'Spying is an essential part of the conduct of war. The calling is not exactly looked up to, but . . . bah! We ourselves have hundreds of Arabian scoundrels in our pay. The rascals only have one fault: their news is never new, and their facts are never true. What did the major say as he passed you?'

'The expenses run to two millions a day,' Pietro translated.

'Nothing more?' cried the officer, relieved, and laughed. 'Money!' He shrugged his shoulders. 'That's nothing to do with us. Many thanks all the same! I . . . er . . . intelligence in the ranks is . . . hem.' He nodded condescendingly, and moved away.

Pietro stood motionless, staring before him.

Although he could not quite understand where the connection came in, he seemed to have a fleeting vision of his elder brother's anxious face.

Company number seven was stationed, until further orders, in a valley between two high sandy ridges. Their outposts were on the southern hill; the regimental convoy was packed behind the northern one. Nearer to the city there was an artillery camp, and still farther off were a provisional commissariat depot and a small hospital. Before them stretched the desert. Presumably the enemy lay somewhere to the south.

The second in command, Lieutenant Carello, came up, full of youth and gaiety.

‘Volunteers!’ he cried heartily. ‘Volunteers!’

Benedetti, the comrade in the rank behind Pietro, stood up and looked questioningly at his officer.

‘Well, you, Fontanara . . . eh?’

The lieutenant smiled, showing his white teeth.

Pietro rose hastily. The best way to rouse himself that he knew, was a long march, and he had need of it.

Zirilli and Rapagnotti joined Pietro. The first half-section was composed of a picked lot of men: it was important to keep up prestige. The other soldiers fell into position.

‘Eight men and the corporal . . . no more!’ The lieutenant gave the word to march, and the reconnoitring patrol moved forward.

Their road was towards the east, along the southern ridge of hills. Captain Vitale, who was everywhere at once and let nothing escape him, came running up.

‘Carello!’

The lieutenant stood still until the captain had overtaken him.

'They are not far off. Keep your eyes open.' He pressed the lieutenant's hand.

With a few long strides the lieutenant came up with his patrol again and took his place at its head. The leather of his revolver-holster creaked loudly at every step.

The patrol swung past the eastern spurs of the sandy ridge, leapt into a newly made trench, and, bending down, continued their way towards the west. Before them lay a small plain on which nothing was to be seen. Behind them rose the long sandy ridge. When the trench came unexpectedly to an end they marched on after the lieutenant had swept the horizon with his field-glasses.

After a quarter of an hour's rapid marching the patrol came to a natural hollow way with steep sides. Cactus plants had taken root here and there between the layers of slate, and a shrub, the name of which Pietro did not know, grew at intervals in great profusion. An advanced post was stationed farther up the pass. The non-commissioned officer in command hurried up to report. Nothing suspicious had been seen the whole of that day.

Lieutenant Carello nodded 'Good-bye' and went on up the pass.

'Now we're really at the front.' He smiled over his shoulder at his men.

Zirilli giggled, and the shadow of a smile flitted across Rapagnotti's sulky face.

The impetuous Carello, who modelled himself as much as possible on his chief, was beloved in the ranks. Pietro involuntarily threw back his shoulders. There was something of the excitement of an adventure

in this cautious advance towards an unknown goal. Benedetti panted heavily beside him.

In a hollow of the pass the lieutenant stood still and looked back. Through his field-glasses he could discern a few dark forms on the crest of the sandy ridge. Men were posted there with signalling flags, and more than one good pair of eyes were searching the ground in front of the patrol. He was being supported from the rear. The lieutenant gave the order for the march to continue.

A kilometre farther on, the pass ended at a hill down which sand and stones had slipped. The patrol had come to a far-stretching hollow of the desert. To the west the sand-waves undulated, one behind the other; to the east the ground lay as flat as a pancake.

Lieutenant Carello frowned and meditated. Immediately afterwards he went up the steep slope on his right. He lay on the ground and swept his field-glasses slowly along the horizon. Nothing but sand-waves was to be seen. Not one speck broke its monotony. Somewhere towards the south a group of palms rose, shadowy, formless, like a half-faded *fata Morgana*.

‘Corporal! You will stay up there with two men.’ The lieutenant, who had climbed nimbly down into the pass, indicated the two last men in the patrol. ‘Have your signal-flags ready; we may have need of them. Forward!’ Carello started off again.

Pietro marched a few paces behind him; behind him again, Benedetti, Zirilli, Rapagnotti and the others. The level plain was on their left: if danger threatened from that side they would perceive it in good time. On their right were the hills through which ran the

hollow way. The corporal was on the highest point with his two companions: if anything suspicious occurred he would warn them by a shot. To the south-west were the rigid-looking waves of sand. The question was whether the enemy was in ambush there.

The patrol moved slowly forward in the loose sand, which made a slight crunching noise as their feet sank into it.

Benedetti suddenly gave a cry and fell to one side. Three or four shots rang out immediately afterwards.

Rapagnotti threw himself flat on the ground. Zirilli followed his example. The others stood for a few moments as though petrified.

'Down . . . down!' the lieutenant commanded impatiently.

As though their legs had been knocked from under them the soldiers threw themselves on to the sand. 'Fontanara . . . down . . . don't you hear!' The lieutenant spoke excitedly, almost angrily.

Pietro lay flat down like the others. They gazed around them eagerly, looking in all directions. There was a whirring in the air, right over Pietro's head, and he pressed closer into the sand.

'Back!' Lieutenant Carello had thrown a lightning glance over the ground and had taken in the situation.

The patrol had the ridge of the hill, alongside of which they had marched, behind them. Towards the west the ridge joined the sandy stretch; to the east lay the plain, dipping towards the centre and from thence rising in slow undulations. Now, as before, there was nothing to be seen in that direction. 'Back! . . . quicker!'

The lieutenant crawled backwards on hands and knees. At the foot of the ridge the ground formed an oblong-shaped dip in which there was better shelter to be had than on the level ground. In half a minute they had reached the little hollow.

‘Do you see anything, Fontanara?’

No matter how Pietro strained his eyes he was still unable to locate the enemy.

‘And they know where we are.’ Lieutenant Carello bit his lips. Benedetti groaned softly. The patrol leader’s thoughts took another turn.

‘What is the matter with you? Where are you hurt?’

Benedetti pointed to the calf of his left leg.

‘Let me see!’ The lieutenant ripped up his trouser leg. ‘Nothing much . . . a slight flesh-wound! There, there is my handkerchief. Help him, Rapagnotti! Wrap it tight round. I am afraid we shall have to run.’

Benedetti looked in horror at his lieutenant. The latter had already turned away from him. Every now and then there was a whirr over the heads of the men. Then there followed a dull thud, which was accompanied each time by a grating sound. When they looked round they noticed how small portions of sand would detach themselves from the hill behind them, coming sliding and rattling down. They were aware that bullet after bullet was hitting the slope. But where the marksmen were hiding themselves they could not discover, for, in the certainty of being hit, no one ventured to stand up and look over the ground.

‘Holy Madonna and all the Saints, where . . . where?’

'Sir . . . over there.' Zirilli pointed towards the plain.

Far away in the distance behind them a row of dark spots moved towards the hollow way which they had just now passed through.

'Those are not the ones who are firing on us, those . . . ' There was a tinkling sound as though a metallic substance had struck the lieutenant's sword sheath, and a shot rang out quite near by. 'Hush, men, quiet!' Carello warned them softly.

Pietro's pulses throbbed; what was this? Invisible enemies were making them their target, perhaps from their hiding-place they would shoot them, one after the other. . . . He glanced to one side and met Zirilli's eyes. Fathomless fear was in their depths. A dizzy feeling of the nearness of death shook Pietro. Was he, unresisting, to be the victim of these invisible rifles? he asked himself, while at the same time his lips formed soundlessly again and again the words 'We are lost.' Zirilli's horror-struck eyes, Rapagnotti's hoarse groans, Benedetti's wailing that resembled the inarticulate cries of a beaten dog, all united in one horrible whole that seized his consciousness with the numbing grip of an evil dream.

'No, no,' he cried aloud, and with a movement as though tearing himself away, he rose to his knees and brought his rifle to his shoulder and pointed it towards the plain.

'They are too far away!' The lieutenant laid his hand on his arm.

At the same moment a shot rang out and a ball whizzed past close to Pietro's head.

'There . . . I saw him!' cried the lieutenant triumphantly.

With one stroke this assurance changed the situation. Pietro turned round and fixed his eyes on the sandy crest of a ridge to the right. Zirilli raised his rifle, waiting. Rapagnotti's groans and Benedetti's whimpering died away.

'Now show your skill, Fontanara!' ordered the lieutenant in an unnatural toneless voice. 'Perhaps our lives may hang on it.'

Pietro's brain was blank, all his being was concentrated in his eyes. Motionless he waited as though cast in bronze. The muzzle of his rifle pointed towards the west, parallel with the slope of the sand-hill behind them; his cheek was pressed to the butt.

A red fez rose up over yonder; at a distance of a few hundred yards the light shone feebly on the barrel of a gun.

Pietro fired. In the same second as the shot rang out, he knew that he had hit his mark.

'Now I see our position clearly.' Lieutenant Carello's voice was once more calm and resonant. 'Quiet now, men! towards the hollow way . . .' He shrugged his shoulders.

All looked towards the plain. It was deserted. The black dots had sunk into a hollow of the desert. Even if they did not reach the ravine before the patrol their rifles would sweep the open plain before them.

The lieutenant continued hurriedly:

'Over there, towards the south-west, there are six or eight men. Those are they who have been firing at us the whole time. There, they are going to send us a reminder again.'

A clump of sand slid down the slope and announced where the ball had hit.

‘They have detached a few men, probably good shots. Those are they to the right of us.’

‘Sir, do you think that we . . .?’ Zirilli’s white lips opened and closed several times, but he did not finish his sentence.

‘No,’ came the harsh answer. ‘Benedetti, can you keep up? There, never mind, you must!’

Pietro threw a searching look back towards the sandy ridge. Apparently the retreat would be across it.

‘No!’ Lieutenant Carello cried again. ‘Over there.’ He pointed towards the west. ‘We will retreat by a detour. This trench stretches a long way. It will be a bit of shelter. Fontanara, keep a good look out . . .’

Pietro had not lost sight of the sand waves to the right. His rifle flew to his shoulder, and the shot rang out simultaneously with the lieutenant’s command. Zirilli, Rapagnotti, and another man fired almost at the same time. In spite of straining their eyes to the very utmost they could not make out anything in that direction.

‘Now!’ Stooping low the lieutenant ran along a small hollow by the slope of the hill. But he was in no great hurry, and looked round often. The young lieutenant was responsible for these men. Like a pang of physical pain he felt once more the horror which had gripped him when he saw how near they were to panic. ‘Benedetti,’ he cried, ‘close behind me! Fontanara! You others three paces behind.’

In a long line, looking now to the left, now in front, the soldiers ran. Their eyes glowed and their hands grasped their rifles with a firmer grip. The enemy

had closed in on them, had enticed them into a trap, they saw that now . . . but they would not surrender . . . not they !

The Turkish patrol in the south quickened its firing. Shots whizzed and whirled over and round the runners, but no one was hit. All was quiet in front of them. The handful of enemies, who, as the lieutenant supposed, were still in hiding, had either cleared out or were awaiting a favourable opportunity. Perhaps they had been hit. Zirilli began to laugh aloud. 'Such donkeys—to hell with them,' he chuckled.

Lieutenant Carello once more glanced back over his shoulder. No, fortunately it was not one of those inexplicable outbreaks during which men do foolish and dangerous deeds. It was courage and the lust of battle that he read in those heated faces. The instinct of self-preservation had given them the strength to act ; he held the men in the hollow of his hand.

In ten paces they would reach the wave of sand. Should they breathe for a moment or charge up its slope without a pause? Were the Turks on the far side? And if so, how many? A dozen different questions buzzed at the same time through the lieutenant's brain. He had no time to think of the answers. He would obey the impulse of the moment, trust to chance, to . . . They had reached the ridge of sand.

'Now !' Lieutenant Carello's voice thrilled with determination. He imparted his feelings to the soldiers. When he pointed with his Browning pistol to the crest they understood him instinctively. The hindermost hastened their steps with one accord ; in a solid group they dashed forward. Zirilli's laughter

passed into angry exclamations. A hoarse growling came from Rapagnotti's throat. Benedetti shouted as though possessed and waved his rifle over his head.

The men waded through the sand, into which they sank up to their ankles. Their eyes rolled, their faces dripped sweat, their chests rose with each sobbing breath. All ran with open mouth; some uttered inarticulate cries, others panted hoarsely. Had they given themselves time, they would have seen that the Turkish patrol—about eight men, the lieutenant thought—was about six hundred yards away. They had come out of their cover and were blazing away their cartridges unceasingly. Would the scouting party, cut off from its line of retreat and almost surrounded, escape them after all? It was disappearing over the crest of the wave of sand, where it would have cover and be very likely to come off without hurt. Of course there was an old corporal and two men over there in the way, but they were doing nothing. Why did they let an enemy get so close? The soldiers in the Turkish patrol fired in a raging hurry, but the enemy continued to run on.

Lieutenant Carello and his men had forgotten that they were being fired on from that side.

'Forward!' The lieutenant's voice rang out triumphantly. They were on the top of the ridge of sand. 'Down . . . down!' The young man looked round with hasty glances. They were safe from the eight rifles out there in the desert. The crest of the ridge covered them . . . at last. And the men? A few of them had thrown themselves down full-length, exhausted. At his side lay Benedetti, his rifle ready to fire. But

what in the name . . . 'Fontanara! Don't you hear? Down, down!'

Pietro stood immovable, his arms crossed over the muzzle of his rifle. His temples throbbed like hammers, his brain was on fire. He had run like the others. The excitement had doubled his strength. When, in advance of all the rest, he reached the top of the wave of sand, his looks were irresistibly drawn towards a body, lying on the ground, five paces in front of him.

Something familiar in the lines and position of the figure awakened new and unexpected ideas in him. He stood still. It seemed to him as though he had run blindfold against a wall, and had been thrust back. Confused and dizzy, he stood before something incomprehensible. The wave of lust for battle and revenge sank within him. A whirlwind of froth and foam overcame him, rose and fell, and returned. His body refused to obey him, his brain hummed like a top, as though turning round an axle which had suddenly grown in its midst.

'Down!' bellowed Lieutenant Carello in a rage.

Pietro did not hear him. With the stilted movements of an automaton he advanced towards the body and stood beside it.

'I never took your hand in farewell, Yussuf Hali,' came softly from his pale lips. 'In the hurry, the confusion . . . You understand now. But I did say that if it depended upon me we would see each other once more. We have seen each other.' He bent down, and said with infinite tenderness, but with shuddering bitterness: 'I did my duty, just as you did. Farewell, Yussuf!'

‘What is the fellow doing? What does he mean by such behaviour?’ The lieutenant’s voice was angry. Was this another of those inexplicable outbreaks of which soldiers are occasionally guilty? He opened his mouth, about to repeat his cry of ‘Down.’

Suddenly, ten or twelve paces away, a shot rang out. Benedetti, who was still kneeling beside his officer, screamed, spread out his arms and fell backwards. Another shot followed. The lieutenant gazed in astonishment at his left arm. It burned and glowed as though it were being pierced with a red-hot needle; he could no longer raise it. After this things moved quickly. Zirilli, who with the other men had been staring at Pietro, sprang up. His eyes glittered unsteadily, and the crazy laugh again came from his lips. Suddenly he started to run forward, his rifle held as a club. Now, too, the others saw what he saw. Over there, in a hollow, lay a Turk on his back. He was wounded in the abdomen and could not move from the spot. That it was an old corporal was shown by the chevrons of soiled braid. His eyes were lack-lustre, his bristly moustache hung over his mouth. He understood that the enemy would soon discover him, and that his life was lost. All at once he took his fate into his own hands. He collected his powers for a last blow, and hurled a few unbelieving dogs before him into eternity . . . ‘Bism’ Allah!’

With fixed bayonet, Zirilli hurled himself upon the wounded man. The corporal with the glazing eyes parried the blows feebly but so cleverly that they did not touch him. His movements were guarded, careful and well-judged, they spoke of long practice. His

look expressed contemptuous unconcern. He had to die: what matter? They all came to that.

The soldiers had sprung up in astonishment. Some of them stared at Zirilli and his opponent. One of them pointed his weapon at the wounded man, but did not venture to shoot for fear of hitting his own comrade. Suddenly Rapagnotti uttered a loud scream. The peasant who had slaughtered so many cattle had an idea. He seized his rifle-stock, and held the weapon as if it were a club. In a few long strides he reached the combatants. The rifle-butt whirled through the air, and descended from behind on the corporal's head. There was no change visible in the corporal's face: it remained as though carved in wood. He received his death-blow with the same stolid indifference that he had shown throughout the encounter. He, like the others, had done his duty. 'Bism' Allah!' Blood and brains were scattered around, but Rapagnotti's blows did not cease. Blow upon blow was struck unconsciously by the peasant. At times the club struck the dead body, at times the ground. The blows were rained down unceasingly and with tremendous force, and were accompanied with a sort of hoarse shout.

Still uttering his senseless laugh Zirilli withdrew from beside his comrade. The other men stood in quaint and unnatural attitudes, their jaws dropping in astonishment at this display of insane rage.

'Rapagnotti!' Lieutenant Carello, holding up his wounded arm in his right hand, stared open-eyed. 'Rapagnotti!' he cried. 'Man!'

Pietro, roused from his thoughts, understood. He signed to several of his comrades, but they drew back,

refusing to understand his intention. Suddenly with a quick movement he tore the gun from Rapagnotti's grasp.

The latter awoke as though from a trance and looked around him wildly. He was still panting from his exertions, drew a deep breath, and cried in a gurgling voice :

'I am hungry.' His senses returned, he looked at his comrades, read something in their manner, turned his eyes towards the misused corpse and shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, it's over,' he said, sulkily. 'Shut up !'

Lieutenant Carello sighed. Here again was that inexplicable something that was always meeting one, now here, now there, that something about which one did not speak, and, if one was wise, one did not think. Besides, he had something else to do. His wounded arm pained him. Benedetti was . . . yes, he was dead. And where was the enemy ?

'Back, march ! Over there !' He pointed towards the north-east. 'We are going back to the ravine. Help me, Fontanara. We must be back before night. It may be dangerous to pass through our outposts in the dark. Have you a handkerchief ? Thank you. Tie it tight round. I have lost blood . . . I am rather giddy.'

The scouting party retired rapidly. It had done its work, and confirmed the presence of the enemy at a short distance from the Italian outposts. Lieutenant Carello leant heavily on Pietro, a man walked on his left side, two others carried Benedetti's body on their rifles. Sometimes the hands and sometimes the feet of the corpse dragged in the sand. The men threw

quick looks behind them. Nothing pointed to the fact that they were followed by the Turkish patrol, the greater portion of which was so far off in the plain that they had nothing to fear from it.

‘Do you think they have understood that they should withdraw?’ asked the lieutenant wearily. Objects seemed to be turning round about him, and he walked sometimes as though he trod on air. However, he conquered his weakness. His responsibility towards his subordinates gave him the strength to hold out. ‘Do you think they have escaped?’ He was thinking of the corporal and the other two whom he had left behind with the signal-flags at the end of the hollow way.

Pietro did not hear him. He walked with his head thrown back and his gaze unwaveringly fixed above. His features were motionless, as though petrified, and the expression of his face resembled that of a sleep-walker. His brain, however, was working clearly and logically.

‘Of course—yes,’ he said quietly to himself. ‘The thing is quite simple and natural. Yussuf Hali used to be a soldier. There was nothing else for him to do in Asia Minor—no more than there was for me. He came over here . . . just as I did; and we shot at one another: it is all quite simple and natural.’

Lieutenant Carello glanced at the soldier at his side. He was uneasy about the stiff attitude and the fixed staring of his eyes.

‘Do you think the corporal and the other two have got away?’ he murmured. A slight feverishness clouded his thoughts, and he clung closely to Pietro’s arm.

'Oh ! I am so hungry,' groaned Rapagnotti, behind them.

The short twilight fell.

'The hollow way !' cried Zirilli, pointing towards the right.

The lieutenant raised himself up and blinked his eyes a few times as though to disperse the fog with which he was surrounded. Oh ! Then they had gone due north instead of north-east. He led Pietro to one side and the latter followed him like an animal obeying the rein. Lieutenant Carello shook his head. What had happened to the man—what was the matter with him ?

They reached the hollow way. If the lieutenant was able to judge rightly in the dim light, they were at most a hundred paces from the outposts. The soldiers slid noisily down the slope. All were sensible of a feeling of security. No Turks were awaiting them here.

'Holy Madonna ! How hungry I am,' sighed Rapagnotti.

The patrol marched forward, all precaution was forgotten. Zirilli was humming a street song. Down there in the hollow it was pitch dark.

Suddenly a voice sounded at a little distance. It called something. What was it ? Instinctively the soldiers moved closer together and tried to pierce the darkness with their eyes.

'What is the matter ?' Lieutenant Carello asked feebly. He had walked some distance with closed eyes and hanging head. 'What . . . Fontanara ?'

A shot, followed closely by two more, blazed in front of them. The cracks sounded right behind them.

‘All simple and natural,’ murmured Pietro, and fell full-length to the ground. He drew the lieutenant down with him as he fell.

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‘Quite simple and natural,’ said Pietro softly, as he opened his eyes. He glanced round the little white-washed room, wearily closed his eyes, and then looked up again. Yes ; everything that had happened was quite simple and natural. A soldier had seen some vague shadows rise up before him. The darkness, the silence, and the sounds that had arisen from it, had made him nervous. He held a loaded rifle in his hand, and he knew that it was his duty to shoot as soon as he saw anything suspicious. Even so, he had taken the trouble to call out something to the advancing shadows. They heard the words, but could not understand them ; and, as no answer came, the soldier fired. The rifles of the two comrades near him went off, although they did not know what was happening. A bullet bored a way through Pietro’s body, a few millimetres over his heart. ‘All quite simple and natural,’ Pietro repeated.

He smiled weakly, and thought of Doctor Del Ponte, a fellow graduate whom he had not seen for ten years, but whom he had met here quite unexpectedly. Thanks to Del Ponte, they had put him in a room to himself.

‘In a bad way !’ the doctor had whispered to the hospital orderlies, who were surprised that a mere private should receive such consideration, and looked at their superior with open eyes.

So Pietro lay in an iron bedstead, with

comparatively clean sheets and a blanket, on which remained the dried-up traces of his predecessor's vomitings.

'Try to sleep!' nodded Del Ponte. 'You need it.'

Pietro looked up painfully at his college friend and closed his eyes again. He seemed to be sinking through an infinite space. Stretched on his back, he fell through the universe. Sometimes he went with tremendous speed, sometimes he floated slowly down, or lay motionless in nothingness. Then the dizzy fall began again; new constellations revealed themselves, and he slid past suns and stars into the depths. Then he lost himself; he was no longer there. He had lost consciousness.

When Pietro awoke from his heavy sleep, he was calm. So long as he remained quite quiet, he had a comfortable sensation of well-being. But if he moved even a finger, a hot stab shot through his left side. Aha! . . . even the fact that a fellow-countryman's bullet had laid him low was simple and natural. He realised that he really ought not to be thinking at all. For some time he managed to avoid doing so. His eyes wandered round the whitewashed walls and rested on the table with its medicine bottle and glass of water. He raised his hand. That hurt his side, and he lowered it again.

'I mustn't think,' he said, and listened to the sounds about him. On the other side of the door, out in the passage, he could hear the shuffling steps of some one in felt slippers and the light tapping of a stick or a crutch on the stone flags. 'A wounded man, who is convalescent,' he murmured. 'No; I

mustn't think, mustn't . . . ' Underneath—or was it next door?—some one groaned softly. He strove to hear more distinctly. 'Another wounded man, a . . . No, no; I mustn't think!' An anxious, questioning look came into his eyes. His whole being seemed to listen eagerly. 'That is a dying man,' he said softly. And, suddenly, he seemed to hear wailing and groaning all round him. From below the unearthly sounds stole up to him through the floor; on either side they penetrated the walls; they echoed from the ceiling. The whole building, from top to bottom, was full of wailing and moaning. The foundations shook; the walls vibrated with it. All the horror, all the pain and torment, which had been suffered within these walls and which were renewed day by day, filled the room and seemed to form an essential part of the atmosphere. The agony of the wounded; the despair of the maimed; the terror of the dying, face to face with the inevitable;—all this flung itself upon him and swept like waves over his head. And now he saw clearly. In each corner of the room a clear stream of blood trickled down, dripped on to the floor and spread outwards. The stream was swelling like a rising flood; in a little while it would reach the bed. . . .

'Del Ponte! . . . Del Ponte! Help!'

An orderly put his head in at the door and stared for a few seconds at the patient. Then he vanished.

Pietro gave a sigh of relief. Luckily, the orderly had left the door open. The blood was flowing out into the passage. He did not want to drown in blood.

Doctor Del Ponte came in and shut the door behind him.

'Good day, Fontanara !' He pressed the wounded man's hand and felt his pulse.

'It's nice of you to come, Del Ponte,' said Pietro. 'I feel much better now and I'd like to talk to you.'

The doctor smiled mysteriously.

'I would advise you to keep quiet,' he said good-naturedly.

'I'm much better, I tell you.' Pietro looked at him severely. 'And I want to talk. The silence is suffocating me.' He took a deep breath.

Del Ponte shrugged his shoulders. If he diagnosed correctly, it did not much matter whether his old fellow-student, whom he had met here so unexpectedly, talked or was silent.

'Now I know,' said Pietro in a resonant voice.

The doctor looked at him in surprise. Certainty and triumph rang in the clear tones of his voice. The unshakeable conviction of a man rang in them, and something more, something that the hearer did not quite understand. Pietro continued :

'It is all lies . . . all . . . all. I joined as a volunteer, not to fight, but to find out the truth. I found lies. Everything to do with war is inextricably mixed up with lies. The two things belong together ; they are one like body and soul. The body is war, and the soul is lying. Body and soul, war and lies—there's the definition for you.'

Pietro looked with clear eyes at Del Ponte, who was leaning against the rail at the foot of the bed and watching him with interest.

'This war differs scarcely perceptibly from all the others,' the wounded man went on. 'The inner core of every war is unalterable. This one was begun for

the same reason that every war is undertaken now-a-days. The cause is not an ideal one. As if anyone ever fought in the twentieth century except about trade. Do you think we shall pull through? What have we gained so far? At home the workshops and factories are shut up, savings are vanishing, and credit is decreasing. Our largest market, our export to the East, is blocked. As our goods cannot find purchasers it does not pay us to manufacture them. But in all the newspapers to be had out here, the talk is of nothing but the enthusiasm of the people for the war.

‘Del Ponte, do you believe in the enthusiasm of the unemployed? Their women and children, their old parents, are starving and freezing. Why? Because there is war. And the war-fever mounts higher and higher. What do you call that? Lies . . . nothing but lies, I say.

‘We lie. We have succeeded in giving foreign countries the false impression that the war is popular. We have blundered, and we deny it. Every war is begun on a foundation of lies. If the truth were told there would be no war. War consists of lies in its origin, its conduct, and in its results. People measure its success, not by benefits directly gained for oneself, but by the amount of damage done to the enemy.

‘I’m not boring you, am I, Del Ponte? You mustn’t refuse to listen to me. I *will* talk. . . . I must talk.

‘Look what is going on in the world at this moment. All the nations are thinking of nothing but arming themselves with hysterical haste. They are arming

for the war which seems to them inevitable. Mark that—inevitable !

‘ Believe me, I see things clearly—I know ! This arming is the cause of the war. If the nations did not arm the dreaded war would never come. So the assurances that they are only arming for the sake of peace are lies. What is the meaning, then, of this hysterical craze for armaments which is sweeping like a simoom across the world and forcing the nations to sacrifice their means of subsistence for the most unfruitful of all causes ? Suspicion and fear. My neighbour—whose railways cross my borders, whose ships are in my harbours, with whom I am in continuous commercial intercourse—I suspect this neighbour of wishing to invade me. Why should he ? Why, of course, so as to conquer some of my country and wring a large indemnity out of me.

‘ Is it likely that my neighbour will do this ?

‘ To make it really possible I must of course take for granted that he is not a man of honour. A decent, loyal citizen does not attack and rob an innocent neighbour. An honourable nation is just as unlikely to do so. . . . You shake your head, Del Ponte, and look incredulous. Of course you are thinking of self-interest, envy, and all the countless evil passions which, according to most people, substantially rule the world. I do not deny that they have their influence. But I deny that evil impulses are sufficient, simply and solely, to drive a nation into war.

‘ We will take the questions in their order.

‘ Given that a nation calls, with her thousands of voices, day after day to her neighbour over the border :
“ You are not honourable, you are planning to attack

me unawares"—what do you think will be the result? At first the neighbour, who is honest at bottom, shrugs his shoulders and pays no attention to the cry. But if it is repeated again and again he will be forced to reflect. He will tell himself that something must lie behind all this noise. And as he knows that his thoughts are honourable and his intentions pure, he calls back: "Lies!" By this time the first shouter has worked himself into such a heat that he hardly knows what he is saying; he is on the borders of hysteria. It is horrible, Del Ponte, when nations become hysterical. They are guilty then of actions which they must bitterly regret—actions which cannot be forgiven. Well, so now the quarrel is in full swing. The newspapers occupy themselves with the great question—which never would have been a question at all if they had not made it one; pamphlets are circulated; tempers begin to rise; passions flare up. And it all resolves itself into one word—armament. The accusation resounds: "The whole of this neighbouring country, with whom I am in perpetual intercourse, is dishonourable, from the ruler of the country to the beggar at the church door. Their sole thought is to invade me!" The neighbour, who would have infinitely preferred the matter to have remained a fairly harmless newspaper scare, clenches his fists. He had never, in his wildest moments, thought of such a war, but now that he hears it discussed unceasingly, it impresses itself on his mind. "Why not?" he asks himself—given that he is the stronger of the two. And then he adds: "I have behaved honourably and decently and have never given cause for this suspicion. Whether I attack this noisy fellow or not,

my position will remain the same, or it will grow worse : for if I don't tackle him it will be attributed to weakness, perhaps to cowardice."

'Let us picture to ourselves a large and a small state in a similar situation. Suddenly in the small state the cry is raised for a lengthening of the period of military service, or an increase of the navy, or something of that kind. Zealous advocates of armament have their way, and the nation shelves one or two necessary reforms ; and with increasing mistrust the neighbour watches this feverish activity. He asks himself what may be behind it all. There is no reply ; the whole thing is an endless whirl of false hopes and treacherous wishes. The neighbour against whom this arming is directed parries the blow by advancing an army corps to the border, or by building double the number of ironclads. It may be that he prefers to quell with the sword the turmoil that some one else has raised.'

Doctor Del Ponte nodded silently. The conviction with which Pietro spoke made an impression on him.

'If I remember aright, you once wrote a treatise on the functions of the brain. What do you think of those thought-waves which, at shorter or longer intervals, obsess the world ? What is the psychological explanation of these phenomena which occur so frequently nowadays ?'

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

'My treatise was done to death. Let it rest in peace. Now I am a military doctor and have no further ambition. As far as hypnotic suggestion on a large scale is concerned, the question is still unanswered. I will just tell you one thing, Fontanara.

Your point of view is better justified than that of the military expert. That means very little if you cannot convince a sufficient number of people that your opinion has the greater value—if, in other words, you don't make it accessible to all.'

'Yes : but my opinions are neither new nor secret. Everybody knows them. I only ask that everyone should think honestly and without prejudice.'

'Then you ask too much.'

'Do you think so ?' Pietro said ; and a real fear rang in his voice.

'Quietly, Fontanara, quietly !' warned the doctor.

'I know what you mean. Lies hinder the people from seeing. They have been brought to such a pass that they most zealously foster that which is most harmful to them. It is touching to see all the sacrifices to which nations subject themselves in order to maintain war. They are for ever arming for the sake of peace, and the consequence of that is that, sooner or later, they are face to face with war.'

'What are you looking for under your pillow ?'

'My notebook. I said just now that the essence of war was lies.—Thanks, Del Ponte !—Here in this book I've collected a few proofs of my statement. The first question is, How is it that war is permitted to be carried on ? Simply because no one, not even those who take part in it, know what war is. Don't look so surprised, Del Ponte : that is a fact. A whole set of lies has been woven into the idea of war : you hear talk about courage, pluck, honour, . . . all the richest words and most sounding phrases in the language are used. And the people believe these lies, or imagine they do—which is the same thing. But the strangest

thing of all is that if you ask a soldier his opinion of war he will have one answer for the cultured man, and a totally different one for his companion in arms. Look at Benedetti, who fell on the same day that I was wounded. He said : " What is war ? Vermin, nothing but vermin." But do you think he'd have said that to a newspaper correspondent or an officer or any other superior ? No. Another comrade, Rapagnotti, a reserved, sullen rascal, replied to the same question : " Hunger." And he ate three times as much as any of us. The remarkable part of it was that he had been obliged to starve all his life and was used to it until he suddenly developed a raging appetite—as a soldier in Africa. And now these two malcontents boast to outsiders far and near about the war, and their enthusiasm for it, and about attacks and fights and the lust of battle and contempt of death. They have learnt a whole lot of phrases and use them as answers. But they don't know they're lying. And at the end of the war, when they are free men again and have no unpleasant consequences to fear, they will talk in just the same strain. That is a proof of courage and manliness which bolsters up their respect for themselves and their country. Believe me, Rapagnotti—that peasant to whose nature the whole business is so contrary that he occasionally goes off his head from sheer distaste of it—will, by and by, lay his hand on his heart and declare in all sincerity that the war was the happiest time of his life.

' You shrug your shoulders,—ignorant, uncritical soldiers you think . . . You can take my word for it, the officers are just the same. After peace is declared, when their wounds are healed and the war is

only an episode in their lives, they will only remember the joy of using physical force, the excitement of adventure, the seduction of danger, the intoxication of victory. All the rest will be forgotten. The anxious waiting through the long nights, the nervousness, the sickness, and the disgusting dirt which is probably the worst part of it all to some of them. Men are very weak, Del Ponte: they would much rather say what is expected of them than the truth.

‘You may object that these are mere details. Yes; but they make up a whole, and they reveal the lies. These lies are unconscious, but they are none the less dangerous. Then there are the conscious ones. Every man in the army, without exception, is visited by doubts in one form or another. If not, why this everlastingly reiterated “I am doing my duty”? The harping on this can only be accounted for by an uneasy conscience. To silence this they take refuge in professions of virtue. They lie; and they know they are lying. Patriotism demands what the conscience forbids. Del Ponte, in my first fight I had an hallucination. I heard a voice saying quite distinctly: “Thou shalt do no murder!” I obeyed and lowered my rifle.’

‘The voice was in your own brain. You had thought such a lot about it, and, when finally it came to action, you reacted. That’s quite simple.’

‘My own explanation, Del Ponte. Everything is quite simple and natural . . . except man himself. Everyone hears this voice within him. Most of them have turned a deaf ear to it for so long that they have lost their hearing. Sensible of them, isn’t it? And that’s why wars still exist and testify to falsehood,



lies, and deceit ; to cruelty and injustice : in a word, to all that we have been taught to detest and condemn. Open the notebook, Del Ponte !—What 's written there ? '

' Lies,' the doctor read on the first page.

Pietro nodded.

' They are just a few short impressions that I collected—no detailed facts. Later on, I will work at them when I am well again. Some one must come forward and state the truth.—The next page, Del Ponte ! '

' The Prisoners,' said the doctor in a subdued voice.

' More than a thousand Arabs were brought from their own country and thrown into stinking barracks in S. Nicola and a few other islands. For what reason ? They defended their country against invaders—in other words, they did their duty. Do you not see, doing your duty is a particularly grave offence in the eyes of your opponent ? What we demand from our soldiers is looked upon as an offence when demanded by the enemy from its men. Consideration for the opponent belongs to the simpler lies.—Go on ! '

' The Clergy.'

' On the outbreak of war, the peace-lovers in various districts tried to set a protest in motion. The clergy of the various denominations immediately refused to countenance it. Neither with regard to this war nor any other has one single minister uttered a word that was worth the hearing. And, surely, from the altar and the pulpit, peace, humanity, and brotherly love should be preached ! But if the clergy cease to preach peace and good-will, if they no longer feel indignation at shame and injustice, what is there left for them

to do? Military chaplain!—Have you ever really thought what that means? “Thou shalt do no murder,” says the commandment! “Thou shalt commit murder,” says the chaplain.—Turn over, Del Ponte!’

‘Spies.’

‘Ah! . . . In times of peace, a man-of-war of a foreign navy enters one of our harbours. The officers are received with open arms by the officers of our fleet. Festivities are the order of the day; wine flows freely; the protestations of friendship take a warmer tone and the guests become filled with brotherly love. In the middle of the banquet, some one notices that one or more of the guests have disappeared. They have been examining the breech-action of a new cannon; with the greatest secrecy they have been sounding the entrance to the harbour: in one word, they have been spying. Wine, hospitality, brotherly love, offered them a favourable opportunity. They have been guilty of theft, of treachery. They declare that it was love of their own country that drove them to it . . . to theft and treachery. Then, to be false and sly is to be patriotic. One who really respected the honour of his country would be the last to accept stolen property. But what happens? War has besmirched even the love of one’s own country.—The next page!’

With a troubled look at Pietro, Del Ponte continued.

‘Politics.’

‘Yes, instead of trying to bring about peace, the ministers busy themselves in augmenting the causes of war. And when war comes, they cry that the National Honour will be tarnished if the blunders of the leaders be not rectified. My poor people! They are aware of

Europe's malicious laughter; they see the universal shoulder-shrugging. What business had you there? Yes—what? And the nation comes together as one man. We have erred, we have been betrayed into shameful deeds. What then? We have paid our portion of the debt heavily enough. We are involved in a great and wearisome war. Our credit is falling; our charitable institutions are filled to overflowing. Soon Italy will be a very cheap country . . . for tourists. For ourselves, we must tighten our belts.

‘The book contains one hundred and fifty pages, Del Ponte. On every page I have noted down a lie . . . I found thousands of lies by which war is surrounded.

‘Del Ponte, I am weary . . . a strange weakness . . . Turn to the last page! Hurry! I must . . .’ The doctor did as he bade him.

‘The Programme,’ he read softly.

An illuminating smile lit up Pietro's face. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it is all quite simple and natural. Just listen! No matter how far one carries out the process of defence it can never give absolute security. One Power may be greater than another, two or three may join forces against a fourth. A neutrality which is guaranteed against every breach of peace may, on the other hand, give a certain amount of security. This is the first law: every nation, large or small, has the inalienable right to the integrity of its territory. Next, disarmament begins slowly—step by step—alike for all. No impossibilities are asked for; as a first step, this only. Not one soldier more; no additional armour-clads . . . rest after the turmoil, rest from all the worry. My poor misguided people! Once more, I see the glow

of health on their cheeks ; I hear their laughter, bright and merry . . . and all the others . . . all those who bled in unjust wars, who were crushed beneath their heavy burdens ; all who suffered in the fear and the unrest. To them, also, belongs the old, ever new message : " Peace on earth, and good-will towards men." Man is not like a tiger. A man wants to be good and upright ; he seeks to go his way without reproach. But these unceasing outcries darken his reason ; render him evil, distrustful, and bitter. There are two different ideas of the world directly opposed to each other. There is the everlasting battle between day and night, between truth and falsehood. At the present time the names are changed ; for now peace and war struggle against each other. War has the dark suspicion that, presently, the world will awake, and, therefore, he is straining every effort to gain the mastery over all men. He gathers all manner of lies for his defence, presses human passions into his service, and besmirches truth. It is of no avail. The people will awake from their blindness. Though darkness still lies heavy on the land, the hour of daybreak approaches.

' When one pictures these . . . peace, happiness . . . joy . . . Del Ponte, help me ! I must make the glad tidings known. Do not shake your head thus, you physician of the body ! There are ways and means and hopes. The Press can do more than the cannon, and the will is stronger than the deed, the pen sharper than the sword. Oh, you of little faith, the time is at hand when truth will conquer falsehood.'

Outside, footsteps were to be heard ; a sword clinked lightly on the pavement ; the door was opened.

The colonel of the regiment, an adjutant, Captain Vitale, Lieutenant Carello—the latter in hospital garb and with his arm in a sling—entered. They were followed by some of the sergeants; and, in the background, Zirilli, Rapagnotti, and a few other privates were visible.

Captain Vitale marched up to the bed, brought his heels together and saluted.

‘Fontanara . . . marksman, I congratulate you! Do you see . . . Er! . . . The medal for valour!’ He laid a glittering object down on the woollen bed-cover.

Pietro opened his eyes wide, and he gazed uncomprehendingly at his commanding officer.

The adjutant opened a paper and began to read.

Pietro made an effort to understand him. He heard his name spoken together with Zirilli’s, Rapagnotti’s, and a few others.

Captain Vitale threw out his chest, twirled his moustache and cried:

‘Seven medals for valour have been awarded at the same time to the company,—seven . . .’

At last Pietro understood. A burning, choking wave passed over him. He opened his lips but only a few unintelligible sounds escaped them.

Doctor Del Ponte hurried to his assistance.

Blood came from the left corner of Pietro’s mouth and trickled in a thin stream down his neck. He did not notice it, he only stared at the medal lying there in the dirt and blood, for, yes he saw it now, his quilt was horribly dirty. But he had no time to think of trifles, his mission must be begun now. His eyes glowed, his chest heaved with a mighty breath. The

hour had come, the light would shine, the truth triumph.

‘Lies . . . lies . . . lies . . .’ came from his lips in jerks. Suddenly he felt as though something tore at his chest and stilled the beating of his heart. Fear clouded his sight, he understood what it was that was approaching him . . . nay, had touched him. The tidings that he was to bring the world would never pass his lips. Why? Was it truth or falsehood that had killed him? A fellow countryman’s bullet . . . the official report called it an enemy’s bullet . . . help . . . truth! Oh! give me time . . .! Thoughts raced through his brain at a lightning speed . . . life . . . death . . . truth . . . falsehood. . . . He drew himself up for a last effort, before his eyes would close for ever, and cried accusingly :

‘War!’

There was total silence in the death-room. The colonel made the sign of the cross : the short, passionate death struggle had impressed him.

Captain Vitale murmured a few sentences of a prayer. Then he drew himself up and exclaimed :

‘Brave Fontanara, I thank you!’ The captain turned from the dead to the living. ‘Comrades, you heard, his last word was “War.” It was an entreaty. He asked that we should revenge him. Comrades, in my own and in your names, I vow vengeance. Fontanara, our marksman, the enemy shall pay dearly for the ball that laid you low!’ Captain Vitale looked round with an air of simple conviction. His huge moustache was trembling and a mist of tears clouded his eyes. The soldiers standing in the doorway drew themselves up ; they met their captain’s glance

openly and earnestly, they had already sworn their oath.

The colonel bowed his head to the body, and the officers followed his example, passing in single file to the door. Captain Vitale saw the notebook in Doctor Del Ponte's hand and whispered :

‘ I suppose that will be . . . er . . . published ? ’

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and answered despondently :

‘ No, what 's the good ? ’

VII

A VISION OF THE FUTURE

THE start had originally been intended for midday. But as the commander-in-chief had expressed the wish to be present, the whole affair had been postponed for a few hours. The airman stood by his machine, waiting ; a few sappers sat together in a group chatting. There was nothing for them to do after they had put the bombs in position. In front of the shed, the doors of which were thrown back, stood about twenty officers who had come together to witness their comrade's bold reconnaissance.

The airman yawned slightly behind his hand, but the general's wish delayed the flight. He frowned and went over to watch one or two companies who were at drill a short distance away.

A man on horseback was approaching from the city.

The officers became mildly excited. Was something going to happen at last ? Yes, the general must have finished his lunch.

The airman stretched himself and filled his lungs. Everything seemed to promise a successful flight. The

sky was certainly overcast, but there was no reason to expect anything but calm weather. He could hardly have chosen a more suitable day.

‘At last,’ he murmured. A group of horsemen were coming from the city.

The soldiers stopped their drill. It would have been unfair to deprive them of the sight of the flying. The officers drew nearer.

‘All ready, captain?’ asked a lieutenant good-naturedly.

‘All ready,’ nodded the airman. He cast a final glance over the machine. No, nothing was missing. He signed to the sappers, who jumped up and took the places already assigned to them.

The general rode up with his escort and halted a little to one side of the hangar. He greeted the airman condescendingly, and saluted the group of officers with his gloved hand, and his clever eyes rested on the machine. He had always taken a lively interest in this new aid to military operations, and he never missed an opportunity of seeing a flight. He sprang lightly from his saddle and went up to the flying-machine. The long row of orders and medals on his breast glittered in the pale light, the gold flashed on his cap, his sword struck rhythmically against the patent leather of his left boot.

‘Aha . . . aha . . . very good,’ he said and smiled, showing two even rows of white teeth under his carefully waxed and brushed-up moustache. He nodded cheerfully to the airman. ‘Now . . . shall we, captain?’

‘Whenever you please, general.’

‘Good. And the bombs, eh?’ The general

indicated the seven shells, placed where the airman could easily reach them.

‘ Yes.’

‘ Good. And you think you can be back again within half an hour ? ’

‘ If nothing unforeseen occurs . . . ’

‘ Good. Here on the drill ground ? ’

‘ If everything happens according to my calculations . . . yes.’

‘ I will await your return. May Our Lady and all the Saints protect you, captain ! ’

The general stepped back a pace. At a sign the sappers began to push the machine forward. The airman took his seat and started the motor experimentally. It was working perfectly.

The great flying-machine wobbled about. The ground was not its element. With mighty, outspread wings, which demanded air and space under them, the machine moved heavily forward for a few yards. The airman, from his seat, smiled at the officers.

His comrades saluted their daring friend with their hands to their caps.

The airman bowed slightly to the general, and then devoted his whole attention to the machine. The motor began to whirr. The flying-machine made a leap forward.

The sun broke through a rift in the clouds. The aeroplane had left the ground and was rising swiftly in a slanting direction. The wings shone, the metal of the frame glittered. The machine rose higher and higher, glided into the sunshine and again into the shadow ; against the light background it looked like some great prehistoric insect.

Eager and interested, officers and men looked with upturned faces and blinking eyes after the vanishing aeroplane.

‘Good,’ exclaimed the general, ‘very good!’ His eyes shone, his orders and medals glittered. ‘Sublime, gentlemen, simply sublime!’ The flying machine became smaller and glided into the infinite. The old general lowered his head and sank into deep thought. That which he had just seen was not only wonderful, it was rich with promise. What vistas opened before him . . . a glance into a future, so dazzling, that . . . that . . . ‘Very good,’ he said aloud, ‘very good!’

A staff-officer was standing beside him and had said something of which he had not heard a word. An orderly came running up.

The general signed to the staff-officer to withdraw.

‘The problem is solved,’ he thought. ‘We only need to take advantage of every improvement in the technique. What a pity I am too old to fly . . .’

The orderly saluted and went away, after having delivered his message, of which the general had not heard a syllable.

‘What was that?’ The old gentleman turned to the major standing beside him. ‘What was that newspaper with the article about the military aviation of to-day?’

‘I have got it with me.’

‘Very good. I will sit down here a little, whilst we are waiting. See that I am not disturbed.’ He took the journal from the major’s hand and threw a searching glance towards the south. With what extraordinary rapidity these flying-machines were developing. New inventions followed one after

another, and at this moment the most epoch-making ones were those for military purposes. 'Very good !' The general sat down on the cloak which his orderly had spread for him and began to turn over the pages of the newspaper handed to him by the major.

The airman had reached a height of from six to eight hundred yards. Gazing steadily ahead he hastened on. The wind created by his speed was cool in his face. But he did not notice it. A hard smile played round his firmly closed lips. He was thinking of his two-fold task. The first thing to do was to find out the disposition of the enemy's troops, and after that to harry and damage them as much as possible. He fancied he could still hear the voices of his brother officers, and his determination increased. He clenched his teeth and his expression grew hard. He was determined to carry out his mission. He was striving not only for the respect of his comrades and the praise of his superior officers, he was flying through the air so as to testify to the unquestionable superiority of the white races. The proofs were there, in the shape of seven powerful bombs. When he flung those down from the sky the proof would be overwhelming, then all contradiction would be silenced.

Behind him the propellers droned harshly and unceasingly. The rigid sand waves beneath him looked strangely confused. Here and there a village glimmered white in the midst of a group of palms. He had not yet passed the advanced lines of his own countrymen. Oh, down there the soldiers were running together from all directions. What was the matter? They had perceived him, they were shouting 'Hurrah !' Triumphant and stimulating the cry rose from below.

He raised one hand from the steering-wheel and waved. He would have liked to descend a little, to have flown so near that they could have heard his answer. But he had no time, his goal was too far off. Quicker and quicker the machine flew through the ether. Look, there was the desert . . . the bare ground beneath him, the bare space above him, and he, the solitary man, floating between the two ! A feeling of mighty power came over him.

‘We men,’ he thought, ‘we masters of air and earth . . .’ The airman’s mission was a great and splendid one. When thousands of others like him traversed space at dizzy heights and with absolute safety, and descended exactly where they wanted to, then indissoluble bonds would be forged between the nations. The aeronauts were the true pioneers of progress, heralds who announced the new . . . no, the old gospel : ‘no more boundaries, no more walls between peoples.’

A sound, like a sharp crack, reached his ear. He looked down and smiled contemptuously. A dozen Arabs on horseback were racing madly in the same direction as himself. An expression of cruelty distorted the airman’s youthful features. Those fellows down there . . . aha ! . . . they were actually amusing themselves by shooting at him. His hand left the steering-wheel and moved towards the bracket on which a bomb was fastened. He owed them a visiting-card, those bare-legged, shouting rascals down there. It would have amused him to watch the effects of the explosion, but . . . well . . .

Again sand, nothing but sand. What was it he had been thinking about ? Oh yes, the speech at the

banquet given to the airmen who were setting out for the war. How did it go? Yes. 'The last important step has been taken, now there need be no obstacles, no delays. The elements have become the servants of mankind. Certainly, it happened now and then that they acted treacherously, but that they could be made to obey there was no doubt whatever. All that now remained was a mechanical problem, over the solution of which thousands of brains had been occupied for a considerable time. Mankind, always seeking a new problem to master, is hastening triumphantly to its completion. Will is the creative power which constructs out of nothingness. It was thanks to their extraordinary will-power that mankind was becoming more and more godlike. To-day we hail as an accomplished fact that which, a few years ago, was nothing but a dream.' An excellent and highly characteristic speech.

Look . . . there were the Turkish lines. Trenches were being dug and . . . Why were all those thousands of soldiers formed in a square? Nobody down there seemed to have noticed the flying-machine as yet; it was a favourable moment for making observations. Why were all the soldiers standing with their rifles at their sides? And . . . What? Arab mollahs . . . they were burying those killed in the last fight. He could not have hoped for a better opportunity.

Two bombs were hastily detached and dropped.

'Ah . . . !'

A faint detonation sounded from below, and then another! Then followed wailings, and angry shouts . . . confusion.

'Hope you 'll enjoy it!' murmured the airman, and

smiled. The pioneers of civilisation were showing what they were worth. Just look, they were shooting at him. So two bombs were not enough. Very well, let them have another !

The flying-machine rocked as though buffeted by the wind. The aviator saw the flaw at once ; intuition told him the cause of it. With a quick movement everything was put right again. He smiled confidently. The instant it occurred, the nervous sensitiveness, so indispensable to an airman, had told him that something had happened. A second later the aeroplane had resumed its even flight.

What had occupied his thoughts just now ? The dream which had become reality . . . That speech was really first-rate—did it not contain everything that was to be said on the subject ? The vision of the future . . . the magnificent possibilities. . . . How easy it had been for the speaker to silence the incredulous ! Everything that man had ever produced had been set down as Utopian when it first appeared. Old men and wiseacres had always shaken their heads ; dreary, unimaginative people had always shrugged their shoulders. And now everything that they had denied, everything that they had suspected, was respected and made use of continuously ; all that had seemed to them useless was now indispensable. The impossible had proved simple and easy to accomplish.

The flying-machine glided on. No, there was nothing down here to be seen. He was behind the Turkish lines now. So far so good ; he turned. But just a little way towards the east first of all.

‘ The restrictions of time and space have been

removed,' he thought, and was once more overwhelmed in the torrent of words which had roused him to such enthusiasm when he had listened to them, and which would always remain in his memory: 'The human intellect had made subject to it earth, fire, water, and air. All these were being employed in the service of mankind.'

'What's that down there? Oh, the red crescent on a white ground! So they had actually had the cheek to set up a field hospital so near the front! Did the enemy imagine that there was no means of punishing them for this audacity? Why, they had actually stretched a great white sheet right over the roof of the hospital! Perhaps another aviator had already flown over here. No; he could not remember having heard of such a thing . . . there! so much for the superiority of civilisation . . . one . . . two bombs . . . fools! The intoxication of flying and the sense of power aroused the desire for further triumphs. He saw the men down below running about in confusion; in the distance he could hear the shrieking and the noise. The aviator smiled. He was proud of his success.

Look! they were honouring him with gun-shots and curses. Fools! Did they not realise their inferiority? Had they not deserved their fate?

The propellers droned unceasingly; the machine throbbed softly. Down below there was nothing to be seen but sand. The furthest outposts of the enemy lay far behind the airman, and . . . no; a patrol party was creeping through a hollow between two hills. So they actually dared to penetrate so near to his countrymen's lines! That cried out for retribution. The prospect of hitting this handful of men with a

bomb was very slight, but . . . the last bomb was taken from its bracket and fell through the air. What's the matter now . . . what? The soldiers down below had caught sight of him, they were putting their hats on their bayonets and waving . . . shouting hurrah . . . oh, they were his countrymen!

The flying-machine hurried onwards with greater speed than heretofore. The airman felt that his cheeks were burning and his heart beating. A strange mixture of terror and curiosity forced him to turn round and look down at the patrol party, which was plodding on its way slowly through the sand. There had been no detonation. The bomb had sunk into the loose sand and lay there half buried . . . until another occasion or for always—who could say?

There, there were the Italian lines. Shouts of hurrah, wavings, rejoicings. . . . The airman thought of what he had thrown down just before. If the bomb had exploded and the men had been injured!

On the farther side of the group of palms the camp from which he had started came in sight. The flying-machine began to descend . . . a little to the left . . . a little more.

The landing was accomplished without difficulty. Like a creature gifted with intelligence the machine obeyed the will at the steering-wheel, a slight vibration still shaking every part of it.

The sappers ran up. The officers, whose numbers had doubled during his absence, drew nearer. The general stood up, folded his newspaper and handed it to the major who had hurried to the spot. From afar off the commander-in-chief had sighted the returning flying-machine and had followed it with

his eyes. A horse was frightened and shied, but soon became calm again.

‘Welcome to the ground, captain!’ The general shook the airman by the hand. He was proud and delighted at this feat performed by an officer in his corps. ‘Very good! What have you to report?’

In sentences of military abruptness the airman gave an account of his reconnoitring. The enemy’s lines were almost parallel to their own, about like this. . . . The airman drew a sketch in the sand. A few strong detachments . . . Arabs, cavalry therefore . . . had pushed forward towards the centre, smaller patrol parties were scattered over the district. He had dropped his bombs, but owing to the speed of his flight he had only been able to watch their effect at one spot. That had been near a field hospital . . . the enemy had stretched a white sheet with the red crescent on it over the roof . . . but he had not been taken in by this precaution.

‘Very good,’ nodded the general.

The flattered airman smiled. Shortly before that he had passed a large number of troops in square formation, they were evidently holding a military funeral. Judging from what he had seen the enemy had suffered tremendous losses in the last fight, and probably an officer of superior rank had been killed. Otherwise, why were they losing time by gathering together the troops in this way?

‘Make a note of that!’ The general signed to the major at his side. He had already produced his notebook and was writing in it. ‘Very good! Telegraph!’

The airman bowed slightly. In his opinion it would be well to reconnoitre again as soon as possible.

The enemy might change his plans. There was nothing further to report.

‘Thank you, captain!’ The general shook him warmly by the hand once more and stood for a few minutes sunk in thought. ‘Gentlemen,’ he began suddenly, turning to the officers, ‘it is incredible how the technique of war has changed. Telephones, telegraphs, wireless communications, war makes use of all these. It presses every new invention into its service. Really most impressive. I have just been reading the latest aviation news from Europe. Our ally Germany and our blood-relation France possess at this moment the largest fleets of aeroplanes in the world. The distance between Metz and Paris can be covered in a few hours. The three hundred aeroplanes which Germany possesses at this moment, all constructed and bought in France, could throw down ten thousand kilos of dynamite on to the metropolis of the world in less than half an hour. This is a positively gigantic thought! In the middle of the night these three hundred flying-machines cross the border, and before daybreak Paris is a heap of ruins! Magnificent, gentlemen, magnificent . . .! Unexpectedly, without any previous warning, the rain of dynamite bursts over the town. One explosion follows close on the other. Hospitals, theatres, schools, museums, public buildings, private houses, all are demolished. The roofs break in, the floors sink through to the cellars, crumbling ruins block up the streets. The sewers break and send their foul contents over everything . . . everything. The water pipes burst and there are floods. The gas pipes burst, gas streams out and explodes and causes an outbreak of fire. The electric

light goes out. You hear the sound of people running together, cries for help, shrieking and wailing, the splashing of water, the roaring of fire. And above it all can be heard the detonations occurring with mathematical precision. Walls fall in, whole buildings disappear in the gaping ground. Men, women, and children rush about mad with terror among the ruins. They drown in filth, they are burnt, blown to pieces in explosions, annihilated, exterminated. Blood streams over the ruins and filth ; gradually the shrieks for help die down. When the last flying-machine has done its work and turned northwards again, the bombardment is finished. In Paris a stillness reigns, such as has never reigned there before.

‘ We can imagine, on the other hand, that the French have carried out this same operation against Berlin, or possibly London. Who knows what political combination the future may have in store ? But be that as it may it only remains to us gratefully to dedicate ourselves to the new and glorious task now set before us. Gentlemen, I bare my head before the marvellous and unceasing progress of mankind.’ The general removed his cap, and his voice vibrated with gratitude to the merciful Providence which would perhaps grant that he would live to see this vision come true ; and he continued : ‘ In the face of this triumphant progress which I have just described, I am not overstepping the mark when I say that we are approaching perfection.’

THE END





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